



Speech

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Central Party School

AIDS – One of the Biggest Challenges to Society

Beijing, 15 June 2005

**Speech by
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Vice President Li Junru, distinguished guests, dear friends, good evening. I am deeply honoured to address the Central Party School, and warmly thank Vice President Li Junru for inviting me here. It is a moving moment to address current and future leaders of the country.

In less than 25 years, AIDS has become one of the greatest challenges of our time, a major challenge of leadership. It no longer should be only considered as just one of the numerous public health problems, but as Professor Li said, as a non-traditional threat to security, an issue that is on par with climate change and extreme poverty. AIDS is also a complex set of problems—requiring a combination of solutions. This epidemic will also be with us for the long term and that means many of the solutions will depend on your leadership today and tomorrow.

AIDS is an exceptional threat to progress. Since it was discovered in the USA in 1981, AIDS has far outstripped our worst fears. More than 60 million people have been infected with HIV and 20 million have died. There is simply no precedent in history for an epidemic with such damaging and long-lasting effects on social and economic development, or on the capacity of states to maintain stability.

AIDS forces us to stretch our thinking across issues in ways and at depths that nearly every generation before us has preferred not to address. To confront AIDS is to confront sexuality and morality, to balance social wellbeing and public security, and to test collective political will and personal commitment. And you cannot engage on AIDS without addressing poverty and the inequality between men and women. Therefore, countering the AIDS epidemic is fundamentally a political issue that has to be guided at the highest levels in the state.

AIDS may be a complex challenge—but is also a problem with a solution. That is probably the most important lesson of two decades of fighting this epidemic.

This evening, I hope to convey the gravity of the global AIDS situation and the need for political engagement by all countries at all levels. I also hope to share some of the progress I have seen in the world including in China – as well as the challenges ahead.

It is clear that China is no exception to the globalized spread of HIV.

There are several factors in China that are driving the epidemic, including the combination of low awareness of HIV in the population, high mobility, migration, rural poverty, AIDS-associated stigma and discrimination as Professor Li just said, the availability of prostitution, and in some regions, of heroin use.

However, Chinese society has many assets that are invaluable in tackling AIDS.

First, and most important, you have real and strong commitment by your senior-most leaders, including President Hu Jintao, Premier Wen Jiabao and Vice-Premier Wu Yi, to stop the AIDS epidemic.

This was very obvious when I met with Premier Wen Jiabao on Monday. The first thing I noticed was that he was wearing a red ribbon, the symbol of the fight against AIDS, and of solidarity with people living with HIV. He told me he was a volunteer in the fight against AIDS, while also being responsible for the well-being of 1.3 billion people. So I believe that all of you should follow his great example

Second, clear policy guidance for effective action on AIDS exists, as outlined in State Council Document No. 7 and in the 'Four Frees and One Care' policy. So there is no doubt of what to be done - now is the time to move from the 'WHAT to do about AIDS' to the 'HOW to do it'.

Action against AIDS is now also growing at the local level. This was clear last week when I visited Yunnan, one of the most seriously affected provinces, where AIDS thrives against a background of poverty, drug use, and cross-border trafficking. As I mentioned these are not easy issues to deal with. And in Yunnan, the 'One Measure and Six Projects for HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control' has been established and Governor Xu is leading the charge with comprehensive prevention efforts targeted at high-risk populations. The Governor is mobilizing all sectors to implement these strategies. There are excellent pilot projects but in order to have a real impact—these programmes will have to be replicated a hundred—if not a thousand times.

Dear friends, confronting AIDS is also confronting contradictions in society. Consider drug use or prostitution. The law must be upheld, but in order to protect the health and well-being of the public, it is equally essential to work with injecting drug users and with sex workers through activities that minimize harm for themselves, and for others. Therefore we need to reach out to people at high risk for HIV infection, and to implement interventions such as methadone maintenance treatment and clean needles for drug users, as well as 100% condom use for sex workers and their clients. Because there is no prostitution without male clients – all this is necessary to protect the well-being of the nation. We see this happening in China.

Moving from the WHAT to HOW on a nation-wide scale will require even more leadership, and innovation. Let me outline four specific challenges.

First is coordination of all AIDS activities. From national to county and district levels, strong coordination of all AIDS action is a prerequisite to success – such leadership and coordination are crucial, because an effective response to AIDS require the engagement of many sectors, many ministries – from public health to public security and education, from the media to the medical profession, and above all of the Party itself. And it is most effective if those affected by the epidemic, such as people living with HIV are also included.

This is what we at UNAIDS call the 'Three Ones' – one action plan, one coordination authority, and one monitoring and evaluation system for all AIDS activities.

Second challenge is the need to reach all people with effective HIV prevention and treatment. China will need to take programmes to scale (from small projects to huge programmes) — I realize this will be a huge undertaking. Consider the challenge of human resources: the country has 22 percent of the world's population but less than 2 percent of the world's medical personnel. This means we must think out of the box—exploring short and long-term solutions. First, intensify training of necessary personnel. Second, ensure full involvement and resources from all relevant sectors, not only the traditional health sector. Third tap into communities including people living with HIV, for local AIDS action. This has been successfully done in other countries in Asia and Africa.

Third, the need for coherence and balance in implementing the policies on AIDS. International experience has taught us that success in the fight against AIDS depends on the equal and forceful implementation of all elements of a multisectoral AIDS policy, like the National AIDS Policy in China. This not only means attention for both HIV prevention and treatment, but also equal attention to law enforcement and harm minimization when it comes to groups at highest risk for HIV infection.

Fourth challenge – and here I echo your top leaders – the need for communities to care for people living with HIV and refrain from discrimination. Fear and stigma are

the best friends of the virus. Only when we have an accepting environment will people come forward to be tested for HIV, will seek help and will help others. This is not expensive but requires courage and leadership, and it requires the engagement of the media and of every citizen.

While the challenges ahead will be difficult to overcome I am now optimistic that China will soon be a global leader in the fight against AIDS, and because last week and this week, I could see with my own eyes that the journey to success has started – as long as action on the ground is greatly intensified now.

Finally, a global problem requires a global response. The AIDS epidemic is a new phenomenon in history. There is nothing that we can copy from the past. Therefore there is a vital need for international cooperation, because we are still learning together across nations, and as Health Minister Gao Qiang said – because HIV knows no borders and AIDS is giving new sense to internationalism because AIDS will not be defeated in ANY country, until it is defeated in EVERY country.

UNAIDS—The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS—was created to bring a better coordinated and cohesive approach to the global response. We are the source for global AIDS policies—and as nations move toward large-scale implementation we are supporting these efforts to make the money work for people on the ground.

There is a lot of talk about UN reform – the reform of the United Nations system. UNAIDS is also a test case for UN reform on the ground—we are bringing together all UN system agencies under one team focused on the AIDS response.

I know you can count on the UN Country Team here, with the Chair of the UN Theme Group on HIV/AIDS and of the entire UNAIDS family for our support. And as requested by senior leaders of China, we are committed to facilitating greater international cooperation with China on AIDS.

It speaks volumes that AIDS is the only health and social issue to be taken up by the United Nations Security Council, as a non-traditional form of security, and because of the threat it poses to stability in the world. And at a Special Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2001 entirely devoted to the AIDS epidemic, the world's countries unanimously issued a Declaration of Commitment on AIDS that warned that the global AIDS epidemic – and I quote: “through its devastating scale and impact, constitutes a global emergency and one of the most formidable challenges to human life and dignity.”

AIDS is a crisis that will continue for some time, there is no doubt about that. China will not be able to achieve a harmonious and well-balanced ‘xiaokang’ society without an intensified response to AIDS. It will take your critical thinking and bold actions now to control the epidemic for future generations.

Nothing less than an AIDS-free new generation should be our goal.

I wish each of you commitment, courage, strength and resourcefulness in your efforts against AIDS. China is a global leader in many aspects, I am convinced that in a few years time China will be a global leader in the fight against AIDS.

Thank you very much.