**Tackling Infectious Diseases and Zoonoses: The Implications**

**Dates: 20th-22nd November 2013**

**Venue: Yangon University of Public Health**

Opening Speech for Mr. Matthew Hedges

Preamble

* Professor Nay, Yangon University of Public Health
* Distinguished Speakers
* Friends and colleagues

Welcome

* Delighted to be here, and delighted to greet our visitors from the UK who have taken the time and effort to make the journey to share their fascinating research insights at today’s workshop, jointly organised by the British High Commission in Singapore and the Yangon University of Public Health.
* This is an era of challenges. Scientific collaborations including events we have organised in recent years, have addressed the problems of climate change, energy security and the threat of infectious diseases. Today we have come together to discuss a no-less-immediate challenge – that of Infectious Diseases and Zoonoses, and their implications for this country.
* Zoonotic diseases are those which humans can contract from animals. A 2004 consultation on emerging zoonotic diseases defined emerging zoonotic diseases as, "a zoonosis that is newly recognized or newly evolved, or that has occurred previously but shows an increase in incidence or expansion in geographical, host or vector range"
* The Asia Pacific Region has, unfortunately, been at the epicentre of such epidemics. Over 30 new infectious agents have been detected in the last three decades, 75% of which have originated in animals (zoonoses). Zoonotic diseases are predicted to cause an increased economic and health burden in this region. A number of factors contribute to these circumstances. The absence of effective surveillance and control programs, prevailing socio-cultural practices and weak public health and veterinary services infrastructure exacerbates the vulnerability of these settings. As the human population increases, global per capita infection rates have risen in tandem.
* While all agree that the people of this country are in urgent need of health interventions and greatly expanded efforts to control and mitigate infectious diseases, the debate about how best to deliver those interventions has also been polarized, and there have been few, if any, opportunities for those engaged in the many and varied efforts underway to meet, share their efforts and undertakings, and discuss the potential for comprehensive responses. Given the politicization of humanitarian and health efforts, it seems prudent to engage the many entities involved in a scientific meeting, where the diseases of importance could be addressed by the best available science and public health program approaches, and where health care providers working in challenging political environments might meet in a shared spirit of professionalism, mutual respect, and tolerance.
* This underscores the importance of today’s workshop. Through presentations and panel discussions, workshop participants will identify pressing challenges in the field of infectious diseases that this country is facing and key research areas that might best inform responses. They will review the influence of Infectious diseases and Zoonoses on human and animal health, development, and economic productivity. Participants will discuss prospects for disease prevention, control and mitigation, and consider opportunities for public health capacity development through institutional collaborations.
* The challenges in controlling infectious diseases are formidable and range from influencing the factors that drive disease emergence, to making surveillance systems fit for purpose, and ensuring that governance mechanisms work effectively to improve control interventions.
* The workshop will focus on a case for multi-institutional, multi-disciplinary research interventions on infectious diseases and zoonoses.
* I am therefore delighted to welcome a truly stellar line up of speakers; many local but also from the UK, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.
* I hope that sharing our knowledge and expertise takes us several steps forward in the move to a secure economy, at the same time deepening the scientific relationship between all the nations gathered here today.
* I would like to thank the organisers for the time and effort in putting this workshop together for the advancement of science and to promote collaborative links between our countries.
* I wish you all a productive and enjoyable day.