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Mak Nyah, HIV patients clean cemetery

Sheila Sri Priya

KUALA LUMPUR: A group of 50 Mak Nyah (transgenders) and people with HIV rolled up their sleeves for a go-tong-royong exercise in Gombak Muslim cemetery yesterday.

For the third year, the group, together with several non-governmental organisations took part in the community effort to commemorate the upcoming World AIDS Day on May 16.

Those present were Mak Nyah from Chow Kit and former drug addicts who are HIV positive.

The group lead by PT Foundation chairman Hisham Hussein said the Gombak cemetery in Jalan Karak was formerly known as the *kubur dagang*. The unclaimed bodies of HIV patients at Sungai Buloh Hospital were buried there.

"Since the early '90s, HIV patients Mak Nyah, and those who have died without families to care of them are buried here. That's why we've picked this graveyard to clean each year close to World AIDS Day," said Hisham.

He said the government had accepted the needle exchange programme for drug addicts.

However, he hoped the government would now allow condoms to be distributed among the sex workers.

"Condom is distributed freely to the

sex workers by NGOs in Thailand and Singapore.

"It is time we do the same here. We are not promoting sex, we are saving lives," said Hisham.

Hisham added that the foundation also has a drop-in centre for people living with HIV in Wisma Tan Com, Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman.

"Here, society's most marginalised people such as female sex workers, Mak Nyah, and people living with HIV can seek help from us. We have a good support team," said Hisham.

The term Mak Nyah is well accepted by transgenders in the country. They only want to be called Mak Nyah and nothing else, said Azean who works as a volunteer at the Malaysian AIDS Council.

"We like to be called Mak Nyah," said Azean.

Ismedi Idrus, 36, works as an executive at the information technology support department for the Malaysian AIDS council. Ismail is HIV positive.

Ismail is a former drug addict. He first injected himself with drugs when he was 16 in his hometown Kelantan.

Today, he leads a healthy lifestyle and hopes to marry someday.

"I have cycled from Kuala Lumpur to Singapore and I am active in other sports such as rock climbing and football.

"I have a girlfriend and if God grants me a long life, I wish to get married," said Ismail.

A memorial service will be held for those who died of HIV at Wisma Tan Com on May 15.

For information, visit www.ptf-malaysia.org.



Hisham Hussein hopes the government will allow condoms to be distributed to sex workers.



Fifty Mak Nyah and HIV patients cleaning the Gombak Muslim cemetery yesterday to commemorate World AIDS Day. — Picture by Mohd Fadli Hamzah