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KOHIMA, MAY07 [EMN] : May 7 carries particularly special meaning for the orphans' advocacy community throughout the world as **World AIDS Orphans' Day**, a grassroots campaign to draw attention to and advocate on behalf of the more than 15 million children orphaned globally by AIDS, is observed.

It has been estimated that globally every 15 seconds, a child loses a parent to AIDS. AIDS orphans are most vulnerable towards the HIV pandemic. They face the risk of finding themselves without shelter, stigmatized and exposed to disease as well as to all forms of violence and exploitation.

Nagaland too recognised the day on Thursday along with the rest of the world under the theme 'Your Voice is Their Future' and pledged to address the psychological trauma of losing a parent, discrimination and needed services of AIDS orphans.

One of the most tragic consequences of the HIV/AIDS epidemic is the huge number of children orphaned as a result of parents dying from AIDS, said Parliamentary Secretary for Social Welfare and Women & Child Development Chotisuh Sazo at the programme held in the State capital.

Sazo also pointed out that neither Nagaland nor India has any documented data on orphaned children and that the number is likely growing and urged the concerned department to make an assessment which would help the State bring out a strategy for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVCs).

Nagaland Government is trying its best to tackle HIV/AIDS related issues, he said, and further stated that Women Development dept is providing nutritional support to women living with HIV/AIDS including children, granting scholarships to effected and infected children, extending vocational training to women, while also providing educational support to 120 OVCs in Dimapur through a funding from Catholic Relief Foundation (CRF), Nagaland Development Organisation. He, however, stressed on the need to expand and increase services.

Effective response must strengthen the capacity of families and communities to continue providing care, protection and to assist the children in meeting their needs, Sazo said, while suggesting that localised efforts initiated by faith-based groups and civil society would contribute much towards children made vulnerable by AIDS.

The Parliamentary Secretary said the significant population of children being orphaned and made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS might usher in a range of other issues, including surging street children population, rise in child labour, child prostitution, exploitive work, vulnerability to crime, a growing population of uneducated and unskilled labourers and long term foreign aid dependence.

He underscored that to address the challenges requires support from families and communities, access to education, health and nutrition for orphans and vocational training. Besides, social protection laws and legal rights must be in place and treatment of HIV positive children made a priority, he said.

"The problem of HIV/AIDS is going to remain. As such, we must accept the reality and rise to address the challenges of AIDS Orphans as 'Your voice is their future', Sazo said.

Naga Mothers' Association president Khesheli Chishi stated that mothers are with the children and assured growth without stigma and discrimination. "Children, we are with you and always will be with you, together we can chase the future," she said.

NNP+ representative Levo asked why the children should suffer and challenged all to show them a way.

Principal Secretary and CEO C J Ponraj called upon all to sit together, assess and identify the seriousness of the problem.

Meanwhile, Project Director NSACS Dr. Niephi Kire spoke on the significance of the day while highlights of the FXB aspiration were delivered by State Coordinator, FXB India Suraksha, Manunla.

It may be mentioned that the Government of Nagaland has also declared 7th May of every year as 'AIDS Orphans Day' in consonance with the global call to provide care and support for children who have been orphaned and in order to enable them to enjoy human right and dignity, development and empowerment.

**Founded by FXB International, World AIDS Orphans Day began as a march on Wall Street in 2002.**