

SPEECH BY DR AHMAD MATTAR,
MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, SINGAPORE
AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF
THE FIFTH ASEAN MINISTERIAL MEETING ON THE ENVIRONMENT
HELD AT THE MARINA MANDARIN, SINGAPORE
ON MONDAY, 17 FEBRUARY 1992 AT 9.30 AM

First let me say how honoured and pleased I am to be given this opportunity to host the Fifth ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on the Environment (AMME). A very warm welcome to all our ASEAN friends. I hope that your stay in Singapore will be a pleasant and memorable one.

The world has undergone many changes since the Fourth AMME in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in 1990. With the end of the Cold War, we are experiencing today the evolution of a new international order for better co-operation among nations and peoples at all levels. There is also an increased awareness of the growing environmental problems in the world.

But being aware of the environmental problems alone is insufficient. The global environmental threats we face will always remain unless there is a true transition from awareness to action to protect the environment and to bring about real changes to our lifestyles.

Environmental protection will remain a major challenge to mankind in this decade. Many environmental problems are transboundary and cross-sectoral in nature. Individuals and countries acting in isolation are not enough to resolve problems of such magnitude. We need to co-operate and to act collectively to stem the tide of global environmental deterioration.

The Fifth AMME is held at an opportune time. Not only will it provide ASEAN the platform to consider its joint response on global environmental issues, it also allows the Environment

Ministers to deliberate on the environmental directions agreed to at the recent Fourth ASEAN Summit held in Singapore.

In June this year, the world will gather in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), or the Earth Summit. The Earth Summit offers a rare and unique opportunity for reaching global consensus on ways to save the ailing planet Earth. I sincerely hope that co-operation, instead of confrontation, will prevail at the Earth Summit. Like you, I look forward to a successful UNCED.

At the last Ministerial Meeting, it was agreed that ASEAN should address the issues to be discussed in UNCED on a united, regional front. Our senior officials have done a good job in developing an ASEAN common stand on UNCED issues for the consideration of the Fifth AMME. This proposed common stand will form the basis for our deliberation and provide a useful ASEAN regional contribution to the Earth Summit.

The ability of ASEAN nations to forge a common stand on UNCED will signify the traditional closeness of the ASEAN spirit of understanding and co-operation. This same spirit was clearly demonstrated at the recent Fourth ASEAN Summit held in Singapore. At the Summit, the Heads of Government jointly set out a clear direction for the future of the region. Together, they charted the course for a stronger intra-ASEAN co-operation.

At the Fourth ASEAN Summit, the Heads of Government agreed that ASEAN member countries should continue to support the principle of sustainable development and work closely on the inter-related issues of environment and development. ASEAN member countries have endorsed the principle and concept of sustainable development since the early 1980s. All of us in ASEAN realised that the true measure of our success in economic growth will depend on how well we have managed our environment in the course of achieving the growth.

The landmark agreement that was reached by the ASEAN leaders to cut tariffs and create a free trade area in the region within 15 years provides a clear vision for ASEAN. The proposed ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) will not only serve to intensify the economic activities in the region but will also reinforce the region's entity as one of the most vibrant and promising economic groupings in the world. The benefits of AFTA will spread beyond economics.

It is my hope that while ASEAN strives for greater economic achievement, it will also emerge as a regional entity successful in maintaining a balance between development and environment. The affirmation of support by the ASEAN Heads of Government for sustainable development indicates the strong political will that prevails in ASEAN to protect the regional and global environment. With support at the highest level, I am sure that we can work together to make ASEAN the role model for sustainable development.

The Heads of Government has directed the Fifth AMME to discuss specific actions and activities to promote regional co-operation on environment and development. They have also agreed that ASEAN should secure support for the region's views and programmes on the environment in the international fora. The direction provided by our Heads of Government is clear. We are charged with the important task of producing appropriate environmental action plans to complement the economic progress of ASEAN. The Fifth AMME has the important mission to begin the process that will take us towards our objectives.

One of the on-going priority areas of ASEAN environmental co-operation is in the control of transboundary pollution. It is in ASEAN's interest to ensure that environmental problems resulting from economic activities are kept under control. I am pleased to note that some work has been initiated by our senior officials on ways that ASEAN countries can share and exchange information to prevent and minimise transboundary pollution.

This is an area that the Fifth AMME can look into to provide the support for the development of this initiative.

Another long term goal of ASEAN environmental cooperation has been to achieve the harmonization of environmental quality standards within the region. To reach this objective, ASEAN member countries will have to work closely together. Due consideration must be given to the different stages of development in each of the ASEAN countries. In this regard, member states should also take steps to jointly identify the technological and financial needs for achieving the set environmental standards.

In the spirit of UNCED, the transfer of environmentally sound technology to developing countries is expected to increase worldwide. Much of this technology transfer can benefit the fast growing Asia-Pacific region, especially ASEAN. We must however create a climate conducive for the use of environmental technology in the region.

The task before us is demanding and challenging. However in the spirit of ASEAN solidarity and collaboration, I am certain that we can succeed. Once again, our appreciation for the support rendered by the ASEAN Environment Ministers and their officials, without whom the Fifth ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on the Environment would not have been possible.

On this note, it is now my pleasure and honour to declare the Fifth ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on the Environment open.

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