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SPEECH BY MR A RAHIM ISHAK, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE  
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"THE ASEAN: WHERE IT STANDS TODAY"

At the outset I would like to thank you for having invited me to speak at this auspicious occasion, the First Congress of the ASEAN Public Relations Organisations (FAPRO). It has provided me with an opportunity to visit the Philippines again and see at first hand the remarkable changes and achievements that are the embodiment of the "New Society". In no small way are these improvements due to the imaginative and far-sighted policies initiated by President Marcos. His efforts at marshalling mass support and popular dedication to the tasks of economic development, social reforms and cultural enrichment contributed in great measure to the stature of the Philippines.

It is necessary to go back at least ten years to understand what the *raison d'être* of ASEAN is and the imperatives which led to its establishment. We ask ourselves what induced five disparate countries to be drawn together to form a regional grouping. What was the motivating force behind the decision of the governments of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand to bring their representatives to Bangkok in 1967? In that year there were ominous signs that the Americans would not be able to successfully accomplish their mission in Vietnam. The year saw the climax of the war in Vietnam and leaders in Southeast Asia felt these premonitions. It was beginning to be clear that communism in the immediate area could not be contained militarily. It was evident that the US was not winning the war but was at best executing a holding out operation. The non-communist states of the region could deduce that the traditional barrier against communist pressures — the presence of western colonial powers strengthened by their



military sinews, in particular the US military presence in the form of bases in the region was eroding and they faced the possibilities of a western withdrawal.

This might have been one factor which induced the five ASEAN governments to come together to mutually reinforce their collective strength. At the same time, it was also understood by some, if not all of the five countries, that the problem of defence in the form of a military grouping would still not meet squarely the communist challenge. This realisation led to the alternative approach that the solution must be found from within the area of the five states and not from outside. The stress was therefore placed on the use of the collective resources of the five to accelerate economic development. Even so among the five there was the lingering doubt whether the regional arrangement should or should not lead to a military organisation, whether an indigenous permutation of SEATO should emerge. There were certain pressures and hints that the new grouping should take on a disguised military character. I remember very well that Mr. Adam Malik was not in favour of military cooperation. Finally, it became clear that the mood was in favour of an economic, social and cultural organisation. The five countries wanted it that way so that they could consciously steer the new ship into the sea of economic cooperation. This is the brief background to the formation of ASEAN.

The recent history of independent and sovereign developing countries shows that internal economic strength is the most effective and in the long term, most reliable weapon to fight local communist insurgency. However, the problem arises when it comes to translating this basic belief into practice. Although considerable progress has been made in this direction, the principle having made itself valid, in various Third World countries, nevertheless the task of building internal strength through regional economic co-operation remains an uphill struggle. Despite this ASEAN has indefatigably and relentlessly pushed this fundamental objective of regional economic cooperation forward. I would offer two reasons why this must be so. The first is that this is an attempt at regional economic cooperation among five developing countries whose basic motivation in all the three fields of economic, political and cultural advancement as new states is nationalism. The institutions

which have ..... /3.



which have been nurtured and developed in our countries are all national in character. Indeed most of us continue to give priority to the dual aims of national unity and nation-building. Under these circumstances it is not altogether smooth sailing in our efforts to modify our national exclusiveness in the face of national pulls and interests. So even before we have covered sufficient ground in our national objectives, it would not be easy for all of us to think purely in regional terms.

In Western Europe, individual members of the European Economic Community were dominated by nationalism for many centuries. Many wars were fought along national lines. Indeed the two World Wars with their legacy of bitter experiences and memories have led many to re-examine the pros and cons of unbridled nationalism. This weariness over nationalism, exacerbated by the challenge of the communist half of Eastern Europe, hastened the inclination and movement towards an economic community based on various common factors. These included democratic political systems, a similar stage of economic development and cultural and linguistic traditions. Furthermore the highly industrialised states of Western Europe were such that their national economies could best develop on a large scale and on the principle of group resources, making economies of scale possible. The complementary nature of their economies was a further incentive. All these factors accelerated the process which finally brought about the European Economic Community. Thus from such humble beginnings of economic cooperation as coal and steel communities in the early years after the Second World War, the EEC grew into what it is today, nine economies linked in almost every aspect. The community will in due course be enlarged to 12 with the membership of Spain, Portugal and Greece.

Only a limited number of the above reasons I have mentioned existed in the five ASEAN countries. Yet the fact that ASEAN had gone on for more than ten years is proof of the silent but dogged determination of the leadership in the five countries to prove that the decision taken in Bangkok in 1967 was the right one. In its relatively short history of ten years, ASEAN has reached two milestones. The first was in Bali in February 1976. For the first time in ASEAN history the Heads of Government met to chart the course for future cooperation. It represented an understanding of



the urgent need to work together in the face of the changing situation in Indochina. The five leaders reaffirmed the commitment to regionalism and voiced the political will to expand cooperation in the economic, social and cultural fields.

The expression of political will to support ASEAN co-operation was made more significant when it was realised that the pace at which progress could be made depended on the degree to which member countries were willing to make adjustments to their national interests for the larger goals of regionalism. The five ASEAN industrial projects which grew out of a decision reached in Bali was a first step towards achieving these fundamental objectives. A large capital outlay was required but they were meant to be projects of a regional character operating on a regional basis. They were meant to attract foreign investors because we knew that the market in ASEAN covers 200 million people whose potential purchasing power was enormous. Those in Bali realised that the regional market by itself was not enough and that the order of priorities was to be first the national market then the regional market and finally the world market. The scale of these industrial projects should not deter us from proceeding with them and we do not believe that the obstacles cannot be overcome.

ASEAN's second milestone came at the Kuala Lumpur Summit 18 months after Bali. It was an occasion for renewed dedication to the objectives set out in the ASEAN Declaration and the Declaration of ASEAN Concord. By then the world economic depression had already set in. All of us to a greater or lesser extent were feeling its adverse effects. We realised that the difficulties which lie ahead of us could be further aggravated by the growing tendency of industrialised countries towards protectionism arising from economic difficulties not altogether unrelated in the context of international economic inter-dependence. The vision of the industrialised countries is perhaps a little blurred. There are some among its leaders and interest groups, like the trade unions, who are unable to see that developing countries like those in ASEAN are important markets for the exports of industries which employ their members and are also major sources of raw materials. It would not be to their interest to retard the economic growth of developing countries through pressures for protectionistic measures.

Instead, they ..... /5.



Instead, they should aim for an open trading environment which would be globally beneficial.

Ten years ago there was considerable scepticism regarding the survival of ASEAN because two earlier attempts at regional co-operation had failed. But today the range of cooperative activities among ASEAN countries have grown in shipping, civil aviation, communications, tourism, science and technology, food, and other agricultural, social and cultural areas. In the field of transportation and communications, ASEAN has embarked on the development of the ASEAN Submarine and Cable System which will facilitate the links among ASEAN countries. A regional satellite system is also under study. In shipping there are plans for the harmonisation of ASEAN national fleets, the organisation of ASEAN-based and controlled shipping conference and the promotion of containerisation. In food and agriculture, to safeguard against shortages the ASEAN countries have devised such measures as the establishment of a food security reserve for ASEAN especially for the supply of rice. An agreement on ASEAN Preferential Trading Arrangement was signed by the Foreign Ministers in February 1977. It provides the legal framework for the promotion of intra-ASEAN trade. Initially a batch of 71 products will enjoy the exchange of trade preferences. A second batch of more than 500 products will soon be added.

The viability of ASEAN could also be seen in the recognition accorded to it by other countries. Today there is a useful and substantial dialogue between ASEAN and the EEC, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States of America. International organisations like the UNDP, FAO, ADB and UNIDO have also established cooperative dialogues with ASEAN. Thus ASEAN has been accepted as a group entity and has attained a good measure of international stature. These countries and organisations are cooperating with ASEAN through programmes of economic and technical assistance. ASEAN recognises the inter-dependent character of the global economy and that national economic growth could be accelerated by plugging into the major economies of the world. To achieve this, ASEAN countries seek improved access to the markets of the developed countries.

Externally, there is growing confidence that no outside

forces have ..... /6.



forces have the intention of destroying ASEAN. Initially, after the Vietnam War, the new leaderships in Indochina criticised ASEAN but in the last 7 or 8 months there is an apparent change in their positions. Vietnam has abandoned its propaganda attacks on ASEAN while actively seeking better bilateral relations with individual members of ASEAN. It is motivated by very strong reasons of national, political and economic interests to win friends in non-communist Southeast Asia. At the same time, they have called for the formation of a new regional grouping which presumably will include Vietnam and Laos. It is difficult for us to interpret the objective of this new proposal. Several vital questions come to mind. Is it the intention of Vietnam and Laos to dismantle ASEAN? Or are they applying for membership of ASEAN? Could countries with ideological differences and different political systems cooperate within the framework of a regional organisation? My initial assessment is that it is unlikely that members of ASEAN would welcome the formation of a new regional grouping because there are too many imponderables.

The People's Republic of China, the biggest power in Asia, now supports ASEAN in no uncertain terms. Her problems with the Soviet Union could have contributed to this attitude. The USSR on her part has been vocal in criticising ASEAN. Today, she has somewhat muted her criticisms by accepting ASEAN as an economic grouping and qualifying this by saying that she does not want ASEAN to become a military bloc. There was a time when the USSR believed that it could be completely self-sufficient. This optimism was based on the assumption that it could meet all the necessary requirements without resorting to external economic resources. Until recently, the People's Republic of China was in a strongly autarkical frame of mind. She has now seen the benefits of foreign trade and technology.

Apart from the big powers, our neighbours in this region have also lent their support to ASEAN. In fact some have expressed their interests in participating in it.

The recognition and acceptance of ASEAN by the western industrialised nations and qualified recognition of it by the socialist bloc have made our regional organisation a permanent



fixture of the international landscape. It is clear that our friends want to help us push it forward. We who are in ASEAN cannot today conceive of its disintegration. We are now used to having the ASEAN umbrella, although each of us may use the umbrella in different ways. For example, some of us might use it to protect against the strong rays of the sun, others to shield themselves from slight drizzles and yet others who use it for shelter from the heavy downpours. Some of us might like to hold it closer to our heads while others higher up. Whatever it may be, all of us find the ASEAN umbrella useful in most weather. In other words it has become second nature to us. If there was no ASEAN today, we would be politically and economically less certain of our future and of our common destiny. ASEAN's continued growth and success would influence the future of other nations in the Asian and Pacific region. We have enough self-confidence to know our strength as well as our weakness. We have and will continue to avoid the mistakes of other regional groupings.

In the region today there is one new reality that we cannot afford to ignore. With the end of the Vietnam War and the withdrawal of American forces, the Indochinese states have emerged on their own and are now represented in various international organizations. This new situation has created a potential arena of conflict among the big powers. Peace in Southeast Asia will be threatened if these conflicts were to be converted into physical confrontation between states. Then even small countries would be drawn into conflicts either with big powers or with the other small states in the region. All that ASEAN asks is that the major powers should prevent these conflicts of interests from becoming confrontations. If the big powers like the Soviet Union, USA, China do not pursue policies which would provoke confrontation, but try to resolve their conflicts peacefully, then ASEAN would do its part to help the process along.

The question is whether in the next ten years ASEAN leaders could be as equally determined to press ahead in realizing its objectives especially if the world economy recovers from the present stagnation. If we act to translate into reality our faith in ourselves and in our potentialities for economic development, then I believe that the investors would come to us. The bargaining



power of our 200 million people will match our aims and in doing so, reinforce our own self-confidence that we are moving in consonance with the world trend towards economic inter-dependence. Major industrial powers like the USA have found that their national economies cannot be insulated without the risk of a bleak future. In this respect we are confident that ASEAN is moving with the wave of the future. We are all dressed up and the curtain has been raised. The play has started. The question is whether it is going to be an optimistic drama like "As You Like It" or a tragedy like "Hamlet". The answer to the question "To be or not to be" lies in our hands.

For us who are neither too optimistic nor pessimistic, it might not be an exercise in futility to dream of the ideal. Imagine the countries in ASEAN were to achieve growth rates of between 15-20% in the immediate years ahead. Imagine also that large and expansive new fields of oil, gold and uranium were to be found in the ASEAN territories in abundance. Externally, what enormous prospects for ASEAN if the Soviet Union and China were to bury the hatchet, embrace each other, and then surprise the world by becoming global angels of mercy working in cooperation and harmony with each other in pursuit of global peace, as well as respect and honour for the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality in Southeast Asia. To complete the picture, imagine the United States joining the Soviet Union and China in a holy trinity to treat Southeast Asia as a charmed circle for regional cooperation. In this idyllic scenario, the communist states of Southeast Asia would hopefully extend full recognition to ASEAN and resolve to live side by side in peace and friendship with the ASEAN countries. The rhetoric of the "anti-imperialist struggle" for "national liberation" or "genuine independence" will then be relegated to mere resource materials for historians. The audience today must pardon me for having presented this Shangrila because we know quite unfortunately that it is not how ASEAN will find the world either today or tomorrow.

In summing up, the first decade of ASEAN has seen the development of a keen sense of regional community which constitutes the indispensable basis for cooperation. We have cultivated the new habits of accepting collective responsibilities. The culmination of this process has been the emergence of a common



ASEAN consciousness and a strong commitment for regional endeavours to reach a common destiny. I am confident that ASEAN can meet the challenges and opportunities ahead.

It remains for me to thank you Mr Chairman and organisers of this First Congress of FAPRO for having provided the excellent and meticulous arrangements which have made my stay in Manila so comfortable and enjoyable. ASEAN recognises that its activities should not only be confined to the governments of the member countries. Private sector participation has been actively encouraged because it has a complementary role to play. The establishment of FAPRO by uniting the practitioners of public relations in ASEAN countries will further enhance the process of making ASEAN better known and understood by our peoples. Yours is a welcome addition to the ranks of ASEAN's private non-governmental organisations because as multipliers of opinion, your members and organisation will further promote the interests of ASEAN.

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