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SPEECH BY SENIOR PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY

FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS, MR ZAINUL ABIDIN RASHEED,

AT THE 55TH SESSION OF ESCAP, 26 APRIL 1999, BANGKOK

Mr Chairman

Let me first congratulate you on your assumption of the Chairmanship of the 55th session of ESCAP. I am sure that we can all look forward to a productive session under your leadership. I would also like to express my appreciation to the Executive Secretary of ESCAP, Mr Adrianus Mooy, for his enthusiasm and commitment to the organisation and its activities.

Mr Chairman

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2 When we step into our offices each morning, it is hard to ignore how technology has changed our lives. We receive telephone calls, faxes and e-mail from around the world. Data records that at one time would have taken weeks to "dig up" can now be produced in an instant. Instructions can be sent and received with just a click of the mouse. And it is not just the way we work that has changed. Husbands and wives call each other from handphones, while children studying abroad e-mail their friends and family at home. 10-year-olds with their own web sites prove that you don't have to be a rocket scientist to use the Internet. Indeed, so much has changed in the last 20 years.

3 Globalisation, however, is not a twentieth-century invention. It has existed since the days of Alexander the Great and Marco Polo. But information technology has accelerated the process beyond all expectations. News travels around the world via satellite. Money crosses borders at the touch of a button. We can

fly to any corner of the world in 24 hours. And with the Internet, we can communicate and do business with any number of people almost anywhere in the world. The world has suddenly become a much smaller place.

4 Globalisation has brought many benefits, enhancing the free-flow of goods, services, capital and most importantly, information. In turn, trade, innovation and competition have been encouraged. With advances in technology, globalisation has opened up our world and helped to bridge cultural divides. Many of us experience European fashions, American music and Asian cuisine without ever leaving our borders. Billions of people around the world can tune in for a "live" satellite broadcast of the opening ceremony of the Olympics, regardless of where it is held.

5 But there is a flipside to this as painfully demonstrated by the Asian financial crisis. With closer links and greater interdependence, there is the risk of a domino effect. The economic troubles of one country can quickly lead to a regional, or even global, crisis. Even technology can be threatened, as witnessed by the frenzy to contain the millennium bug.

Mr Chairman,

6 Faced with these troubles, our first impulse is to turn our backs on the world and retreat into a familiar zone. But we cannot go back. With globalisation has come exposure to new ideas, rapid advances in technology, a global awareness of the environment and greater understanding of the threats to international security. The desire to work more closely together must necessarily be boosted by these growing connections. We can no longer afford to exist in isolation if we want to survive into the next millennium.

7 I believe that globalisation will be the major driving force in the next 50 years. Therefore, if governments want to stay relevant, they must learn to manage both the positive and negative impacts of globalisation on their people and society.

8 If we, the countries of the Asia-Pacific region, work together in this new world, we can use the golden opportunity presented by globalisation to industrialise, grasp the newest technology and provide education for our people. We must seize this opportunity now. Unlike the traditional limited resources such as land, oil and raw materials, information is infinite and can be passed easily among users. More importantly, with the exchange of information, our most valuable resource – our people – can be developed. The age of information technology has made education and training programmes more accessible to all. No one need be deprived of this technology.

9 Even though we are ourselves still developing our expertise in this field, we hope that through our Singapore Cooperation Programme, we can impart some of our knowledge to our fellow ESCAP member countries. That is why, in 1997,

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Singapore signed an MOU with ESCAP to offer technical assistance and training programmes to ESCAP member countries. Over the next 12 months, Singapore will offer six courses focussing in the area of information technology management and Internet applications. Our experience may not be relevant to everyone, but where we can be helpful, we hope we can make a difference. More information on the information technology courses and application forms can be obtained from any Singapore Mission.

Mr Chairman

10 Globalisation has introduced many major new challenges for all of us here. We cannot walk away from them. Instead, we should strive to work together, to harness these new global forces to increase our share of global income, and ultimately, improve the living standards of our people. This is our mission as we enter the new millennium. We look forward to a better future together.

11 Thank you, Mr Chairman.

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