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SPEECH BY MR EUGENE YAP GIAU CHENG, SENIOR PARLIAMENTARY
SECRETARY (LABOUR AND THE ENVIRONMENT), AT THE 10TH
ILO ASIAN REGIONAL CONFERENCE HELD IN JAKARTA,
ON WEDNESDAY, 5 DECEMBER 1985 AT 11.00 AM (JAKARTA TIME)

Mr President, on behalf of the Singapore Delegation, may I congratulate you for being unanimously elected to the chair. We are confident that under your able guidance, the 10th ILO Asian Regional Conference will be a fruitful and a successful one. I would also like to register our appreciation to the Government and the people of Indonesia for hosting this Conference and for the hospitality extended to us.

The year 1985 which is soon coming to a close saw many countries in Asia experiencing lower economic growth and high unemployment. The economic and unemployment problems in Asia are related to the current economic predicaments faced by the OECD countries, particularly the United States. For 1985, the US economy is expected to grow by just three per cent as compared with 6.8 per cent in 1984. The sluggish economy of the United States has had adverse consequences on Asian countries as many of them depend heavily on the US market for export. This can be seen from the fact that in almost all countries in Asia, their GDP growth for 1985 has declined. With OECD countries failing to maintain the momentum of economic recovery and with commodity prices continuing to be depressed world-wide, the economic prospects for 1986 for Asia and other parts of the world remain bleak.

Population growth in Asia is one of the highest in the world. Each year, some 10 million youths will join the labour market. It will therefore be a gigantic task for the governments concerned to tackle the unemployment problem. With the slow-down in the economies of the Asian countries, the problem of unemployment will be aggravated, thus making the task of generating enough employment opportunities for job-seekers to be much more difficult.

Mr President, unemployment in the OECD countries too is expected to remain high. With the high level of unemployment, governments of these countries are likely to be pressurised into taking protectionist measures against imports including those from Asia. The Jenkins Bill recently passed by the US Congress and Senate is a case in point. It aims at cutting textile imports from 20 top producing countries, including Hong Kong, South Korea, China and the ASEAN countries. Textile and garment industries in our region provide one of the largest sources of employment and foreign exchange. Any cutback in production would have serious repercussions on their depressed economies and further aggravate the situation of unemployment.

The adoption of trade protectionist measures by developed countries to protect jobs is a retrogressive step in an era where much of our prosperity has been made possible through the promotion of free trade. In an increasingly interdependent world, any restrictive measures to curtail trade and reduce the free flow of capital and technology among nations would only lead to global economic stagnation to the detriment of all nations.

The OECD countries are the major markets for Asian agricultural and manufactured products. From the developed countries, Asian developing nations import their capital, technology and management know-how, without which their economies cannot take off. Prevented from exporting their

products to the developed countries, developing nations will be prevented from buying from them capital equipment and sophisticated products and services. They will also have great difficulty in servicing their debts. Consequently, the economic and employment situation of the developed countries will also be adversely affected. Thus it is clear that protectionism protects no one. The solution to poor economic growth and high unemployment therefore lies on the promotion of more, and not less trade.

May I now make some comments regarding ILO labour standards setting. Mr President, while it is essential for the ILO to set basic international labour standards, it is equally important that the setting of such standards should take into consideration the social and economic conditions of different countries. It would be unrealistic for the ILO to set standards which can only be ratified by a small number of ILO member states with the majority finding it difficult to follow. The consideration given to the different social and economic conditions of the developing countries in standard setting will certainly help to ensure that more member states of the ILO could ratify its conventions and recommendations.

In applying the ratified conventions and recommendations, the ILO Committee of Experts should also adopt a more flexible approach and should give due consideration to the stage of development as well as the overall social and cultural conditions of its member countries. This would mean that there is a need for the ILO Committee of Experts to have a better understanding and appreciation of the economic and social conditions of the developing countries. Better understanding and appreciation will help to bridge the differences between the ILO and its member states on the implementation of ILO Conventions.

For many years, Singapore and other members of Asean have repeatedly urged the ILO and the Committee of Experts to take a more flexible and realistic approach in its standard setting, and its implementation of ratified ILO conventions. On this occasion of the 10th ILO Asian Regional Conference, we would like to once again urge the ILO to take positive steps to make appropriate adjustments so that ILO standards could be more meaningfully introduced and complied with.

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