

*The Founding of ASEAN**

First of all, on behalf of my Delegation and the Government of Singapore, I would like to thank the Government of Thailand and its people for hosting this Conference of what is today, five countries and in the course of years to come of many more countries of Southeast Asia. Secondly, on behalf of my Delegation, I would like to extend particular thanks to our Chairman for the tactful, judicious and patient way in which he guided our not always coherent deliberations towards a more than successful conclusion. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the officers who did excellent work in translating our intentions into more concrete form by way of documents and papers.

So, today, after four days of rather pleasant and friendly discussions, we are about to launch the new ASEAN. It is easy to give birth to a new organisation but the creation of an organisation of this nature is the most simple of all tasks. It is a mere skeleton that we have erected. Now the really difficult task is to give flesh and blood to this concept. We, in Singapore, are not unmindful of the fact that schemes for regional cooperation will run into more rocks than calm waters. Nevertheless, having had four or five days of discussions with my ministerial colleagues, there is one thing that is uppermost in my mind and that is the conviction of my ministerial colleagues in regard to both the inevitability and the desirability of regional cooperation. However, it would be necessary not only for ministers or leaders to take this new regional scheme seriously but also to transmit to its people the need for a new kind of thinking.

For 20 years each of us in this region had been compelled to do things purely on the basis of nationalist fervour. And many of us know that after 20 years of decolonisation, nationalism alone

*Full text of the statement by Mr S Rajaratnam, Minister for Foreign Affairs, in Bangkok on August 8, 1967.

has not provided or fulfilled the expectations by way of happier life, more fruitful life, better living standards to our countries and for our peoples. This realisation has grown and, therefore, it is necessary for us if we are really to be successful in giving life to ASEAN to marry national thinking with regional thinking. We must now think at two levels. We must think not only of our national interests but posit them against regional interests: That is a new way of thinking about our problems. And that is two different things and sometimes they can conflict. Secondly, we must also accept the fact, if we are really serious about it, that regional existence means painful adjustments to those practices, and thinking in our respective countries. We must make these painful and difficult adjustments. If we are not going to do that, then regionalism remains a Utopia.

The last point that I would like to stress is that there may be, as has happened to other associations of this kind, misunderstanding as to what ASEAN is all about. So, I would like to stress that those who are outside the grouping should not regard this as a grouping against anything, against anybody. We have approached ASEAN as standing for something, not against anything. If there are people who misunderstood the proposed regional grouping, or manifest hostility against it, let us explain that it can only be because as in Europe and in many parts of the world, outside powers have vested interests in the balkanisation of this region. We ourselves have learned the lessons and have decided that small nations are not going to be balkanised so that they can be manipulated, set against one another, kept perpetually weak, divided and ineffective by outside forces.

So, as far as we are concerned, we want to ensure a stable Southeast Asia not a balkanised Southeast Asia. And those countries who are interested, genuinely interested, in the stability of Southeast Asia, the prosperity in Southeast Asia, and better economic, and social conditions will welcome small countries getting together to pool their collective resources and their collective wisdom to

contribute to the peace of the world. The more unstable Southeast Asia is, the more the peace of the world is also threatened.

So, I would urge people outside the region not to misunderstand this coming together of our five and other Southeast Asian countries. We want to ensure that ASEAN stands for the interests of ASEAN and therefore by implication for the peace and prosperity of the world. That is all we are interested in. And if other countries think of tomorrow and are willing to help us to achieve this objective, they will be welcomed as friends. And we will also be worthwhile friends to them.

However, in order to win over regard and respect from the outside world, we must first take ASEAN seriously ourselves. There are a lot of people watching what all this is going to amount to. So first we must take our own child seriously. We must convince those that are watching us that we are prepared to make the adjustments and sacrifices necessary to achieve our objective and we are serious about it. The message must get through that this time the Southeast Asian countries are not going to be like the Balkans during the last two World Wars; that they are not going to be pushed around; once other nations take us seriously, just as we take ourselves seriously; once there is acceptance of our role as a united grouping of Asian countries, then we can bring peace and prosperity to this region as well as to the rest of the world.

National Archives of Singapore