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OPENING ADDRESS BY DR AHMAD MATTAR,
MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT,
AT THE PACIFIC BASIN CONFERENCE ON HAZARDOUS WASTE
AT RELC INTERNATIONAL HOUSE
ON TUESDAY, 4 APRIL 1989 AT 9.00 AM

It gives me great pleasure to welcome our distinguished overseas visitors to Singapore and I wish to thank Dr Nay Htun, Director of United Nations Environment Programme's (UNEP's) Regional Office and Dr Carillo, the Executive Secretary of Pacific Basin Consortium for inviting me to address you.

The Pacific Basin Conference on Hazardous Waste is a highly regarded event among professionals and policy makers in hazardous waste management. It has been able to achieve significant success in drawing in renowned professionals due to the vast network of the Consortium. Singapore is privileged to host this year's Conference and at a very timely moment too. Only last month, a Conference of Plenipotentiaries in Basel was held to adopt the International Convention on Transboundary Movement of Hazardous Waste.

Science and technology has progressed so rapidly over the last few decades with new discovery of chemical substances, processes and equipment occurring almost daily. Each year several thousand new compounds are synthesised in the laboratories and although only a fraction of these goes into commercial production, our knowledge and understanding of them and their waste are limited. In order to serve the growing needs, industries were only too eager to produce and

meet the demand, often not seriously examining the unwanted product at the end of the production line. As industries become more sophisticated and high technology oriented, the waste produced is in lesser quantity but much more concentrated, more toxic and more hazardous.

Waste treatment, especially for hazardous waste, is no more as simple as sanitary landfill or dumping into a river anymore. Each waste has its own characteristic and treatment procedure. The discharge of mercurious waste into the Minamata Bay in Japan and the burying of tonnes of polychloro-biphenyl (PCB) in the ground in the United States are no more acceptable practices. A whole new field of science has been developed on waste treatment to enable us to fully understand its risk, its public health hazards and its environmental impact.

In recent years, we have read of many cases of hazardous waste dumps coming back to haunt us. The earliest that caught our attention this decade was the Love Canal in the United States where residents had to be evacuated from their homes to avoid further PCB poisoning. Other discoveries of hazardous waste disposal sites included those in West Germany and the Netherlands. In the early periods of industrialisation, industrialists were ignorant of the negative impact of their actions. The Minamata Mercury Poisoning and the Itai Itai Cadmium Poisoning in Japan were clear demonstrations of insufficient knowledge and lack of social responsibilities of some big companies. Today this inconsiderate attitude of the businessmen has not disappeared as we read of the outcry of Third World countries, vehemently protesting the dumping of toxic industrial waste, produced by factories from the developed countries, in their backyards. Examples abound.

The 'Khian Sea' tried in vain to get rid of 13,000 tonnes of contaminated ash from incinerators of Philadelphia. The 'Karin B' had to collect its illegally dumped waste from Nigeria and ship it back to Europe.

Nobody really knows how many hazardous waste dumps there are around the world. In the United States, an estimated 75,000 active industrial landfill sites and 180,000 surface impoundments (or ponds) may contain hazardous waste. The Netherlands Government estimates that she has eight million tonnes of hazardous chemical wastes buried in Dutch soil, while West Germany anticipates spending US\$4 billion cleaning up its abandoned hazardous waste sites.

The agricultural sector is not totally innocent too. Excessive use of pesticides and insecticides often seep through the soil and end up as waste in natural water courses, affecting potable water supplies. What is worst is that often pesticides and insecticides that are banned in developed countries are still widely used in developing and Third World countries. Ignorance of farmers and lack of control add to the problem.

The growing concern in hazardous waste management is also fuelled by the realisation of an urgent need to act and the ambiguity of its definition and appropriate management practices. This increasing sense of urgency to tackle the problem has led many governments in developed and developing countries to initiate action or institute legislations to regulate the import, handling, storage, transportation and disposal of hazardous wastes.

An international legal instrument to control trans-boundary transportation of hazardous waste is useful for some form of global control. However policing illegal traffic in hazardous waste requires substantial resources and developing countries would have difficulty diverting much needed funds for economic development to be used for personnel to be trained to regulate the import, export and transit movement of hazardous waste. Much more is to be expected of the developed countries to share their low-waste technology with the developing countries, to transfer only acceptable technology in their own country to developing

countries, and to train the necessary personnel. Industries should not export what is already banned in developed countries to less developed countries. Of course, there are also many responsible multi-nationals who have come forward to play their role in the international community. They have set up their own environmental policy and control units. We need more of them to help in the successful management of hazardous waste in the less developed countries.

Recognition of the dangers of hazardous wastes is relatively recent, only in the last two decades. The industrialised countries of Europe and USA only began significant regulations of hazardous and toxic wastes during the past fifteen years. The developing countries only began to examine their internal systems of control and updating incomplete or outdated legislations and procedures to tackle the problem recently. Judging with hindsight it should be stressed that dumping should not be seen as the only resort for hazardous waste management but only as a last resort.

Today, the fortune of countries in the Asia Pacific region has changed. Few decades ago, investment in this part of the world was minimal, mainly on primary produce. Japan today is an economic power. Four Asian nations including Singapore are Newly Industrialised Countries and more will be joining the league. Manufacturing with increasing emphasis on value-added processes, has become an important contributor to economic growth and high technology plants are fairly common in many countries in the region. The problem of waste management has become an issue of increasing importance both to the industry and to the environmental agency.

The holding of such a Conference in this part of the world is thus timely, appropriate and affordable for participants of the developing countries in the Asia Pacific Region. UNEP's Regional Office's support has also

contributed significantly to the understanding of this complex subject of hazardous waste management when participants returned to draw up national strategies to deal with the problem.

Finally, I like to wish you a fruitful conference and a pleasant stay in Singapore. It is my pleasure now to declare the Pacific Basin Conference on Hazardous Waste open.

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