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SPEECH BY THE ACTING MINISTER FOR CULTURE, MR ONG  
TENG CHEONG, AT THE OPENING OF THE THIRD GENERAL  
ASSEMBLY OF THE CONFEDERATION OF ASEAN JOURNALISTS AT  
THE APOLLO HOTEL ON MONDAY, MARCH 12, 1979, AT 10 A.M.

I would like to thank the Central Council of the Singapore National Union of Journalists for inviting me to open the Third General Assembly of the Confederation of Asean Journalists (CAJ).

The Confederation of Asean Journalists, I understand, was formed in Jakarta in March 1975. Its establishment ushered in a new chapter in the annals of regional journalism. Over the past years, you all have established close ties and rapport with one another.

Your organisation has, as its objectives, the advancement of journalism in the Asean region; the promotion of a healthy, free and responsible press; and the enhancement of the development of the region and of the member countries. These objectives are certainly worth striving for and deserve the support of everyone.

The realization of your objectives is of great concern to everyone in Asean. This is because you, the practitioners of the mass media, have, in your hands, power to influence and shape the social, economic and political future of your own countries and of the region as a whole. Your deliberations at this General Assembly will be followed by many with interest.

The governments in Asean recognise the constructive role journalists can play in the development of the regional organisation and of the member countries. This recognition is reflected in the Declaration of Asean Concord expressing "support of Asean scholars, writers, artists and mass media representatives to enable them to play an active role in fostering a sense of regional identity and fellowship".

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For the Asean press to play a meaningful role in the development of the region, its journalists need to upgrade their professional competence. Professionalism cannot merely be equated with one's ability to write a report, edit a copy or do a feature. It is more than that. The journalist must be able to understand and appreciate the socio-cultural and politico-economic milieu within which he works.

The journalist in Asean and other developing countries should not mindlessly ape the professional approach of his counterpart in developed countries. In writing pieces critical of government policies or issues facing the country, he should not adopt the unfettered freedom irresponsibly exercised by his Western counterpart. He should be more responsible in his criticism. He should be conscious of the political, economic, social and cultural environment and the sensitivities of his people. Unless he can strike a right balance between freedom and responsibility, he would be more a negative than a positive factor in our efforts to overcome the problems facing our region.

Asean urgently needs well-informed and highly competent journalists who can interpret the realities of the region fairly and perceptively. They should rise above the temptations of filing irresponsible or frivolous copy for the sake of instant popularity. Such high-calibred journalists will not only help to project a correct and favourable image of the Asean region, but will also help to strengthen the Asean press as a viable collective institution.

The concern over the imbalance in the global flow of information is a legitimate concern. However, we should also be concerned with the lack of flow of information within the Asean region.

While our mass media have given good coverage of Asean ministerial conferences, they have not provided consistent and adequate coverage of other events in member Asean countries. Political and economic issues facing individual member countries do get an occasional mention in our leading newspapers. This is not enough. The press has to make a conscious effort to promote better understanding among the Asean people of one another's way of life, customs and manners. Unless and until the ordinary people

in our own villages, towns and cities learn to understand and appreciate one another's problems and aspirations, Ascan will remain largely a governmental affair.

Your organisation did take note of this inadequacy in your last two general assemblies, but remedy appears to be slow in coming. Without devoting more space to news about member countries, it is not possible to instil in our people a greater sense of regional consciousness, regional identity and regional purpose.

The survival of Ascan depends on the people of member countries to have a stake in the region. In this regard, you, as Ascan journalists, have the duty of encouraging our people to take a greater interest in what is going on in our part of the world. It is also your responsibility to make them aware that we share common problems and aspirations and that our personal future and the future of our countries are inextricably interwoven. We need therefore to work closer together with greater solidarity to ensure our survival and progress.

On this note, I declare open the Third General Assembly of the Confederation of Ascan Journalists.

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