

SPEECH BY: DATO' SERI DR. MAHATHIR BIN MOHAMAD  
( PRIME MINISTER )

EVENT: THE OPENING OF THE 5TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF  
THE ORGANIZATION OF ASIAN NEWS AGENCIES (OANA)

VENUE: FEDERAL HOTEL, KUALA LUMPUR

DATE: 03 NOV 1981

TIME:

Saya mengambil peluang ini untuk mengucapkan terima kasih kepada Urusetia Perhimpunan Agung OANA Yang Kelima yang telah menjemput dan memberi penghormatan kepada saya untuk merasmikan Perhimpunan ini. Kepada para peserta sekalian saya dengan segala sukacitanya mengucapkan selamat datang ke Kuala Lumpur dan Malaysia dengan harapan semasa saudara-saudara berada di sini saudara-saudara akan dapat melihat dengan lebih dekat lagi masyarakat dan cara hidup di sini.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

2. Allow me first and foremost to thank the Secretariat for giving me the honour to declare open this assembly. On behalf of BERNAMA, Malaysia's NATIONAL News Agency, let me express my gratitude to UNESCO and the Executive Board of the Organization of Asian News Agencies for choosing Malaysia as the host country for this meeting.

3. If I may recall, this is the second large regional gathering of key media and media related personnel to have been held in this country within the past three years. The first was the Intergovernmental Conference on Communication Policies in Asia and Oceania or ASIOCOM held in February, 1979.

4. I deliberately mentioned ASIOCOM not only because it is related to this meeting but also because it was during that Conference that OANA formally made an offer to provide the organizational framework for a news exchange programme among Asian countries, a concept first mooted in a UNESCO-sponsored meeting of experts in Colombo in 1976. Although it is now almost five years since the idea was first mooted and close to three years after it was given an official blessing in the form of declarations and recommendations adopted at the ASIOCOM, we are yet to see that concept translated into reality. Nevertheless, bearing in mind the varied policies pursued by the various News Agencies now available in Asia, I could not help but be sympathetic with all of you for the numerous problems you have to overcome before taking substantive action on the matter.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

5. The role of the mass media in national development as we are quite aware, has been the underlying theme of numerous fora for many years. It is a favourite research topic among social scientists. Various United Nation Agencies too, including the UNESCO, has from time to time directed their attention to this area of study.

6. Being experts in the field in your own right, I am sure you are very familiar with the subject. It is not my intention, therefore, to dwell on it at great length. A particular point that I wish to emphasise here is what I consider as the lack of a sense of social responsibility on the part of some media personnel. This lack of concern or absence of responsibility on the part of some journalists is what brings you here to-day.

7. We in Malaysia are particularly concerned with the frequent incidents of misreporting, deliberate or otherwise, about our affairs in the foreign press, especially Western Press. We had our first few bitter doses of uncalled-for publicity shortly after the May 13, 1969 racial riots in which foreign readers were regaled with distorted views of the events happening then. Indeed dire predictions were made which imply that the world could write off Malaysia. In the event Malaysia did not only get over her difficulties, but she emerged stronger, more united and more prosperous than ever before.

8. Nevertheless, the years following that unfortunate incident saw us occasionally falling victim to the wild imaginations and sensation-mindedness of some irresponsible journalists, some of whom had not even visited our country. Lately, as a result of our legitimate attempts to gain control of our own resources, we have been subjected to various reports calculated to frighten away foreign investors from our country. Against this campaign, we are literally speaking, helpless. The newspapers of one western country, particularly if English speaking, is enough to damage us in the eyes of the world.

9. For those of you who have just arrived in this country you may notice that Malaysia is not by any means the most modern country. Within the capital, Kuala Lumpur, and in the rural areas, there are people living in dilapidated huts. Nevertheless, I am sure you would have noticed that we do not live on trees. Imagine our mild surprise when a book widely distributed throughout the world among children and adults described and illustrated how Malaysians live on trees in order to escape wild animals. The only people Malaysians would like to escape from are these kind of publishers. I am sure that if the media as a whole is sensitive and cares for the truth, or at least a modicum of that commodity, this kind of thing would not happen.

10. You too may have come across such rubbish. How do we overcome this problem? The answer to a great extent lies with us. We should not allow others to monopolise information about ourself. We should expand our efforts at informing the world what is the truth about ourself and what is fiction. Asians should not fall into the pattern of sensationalism and unmitigated embellishment of the truth that characterise the western press. We should tell things as they are. In time the world will learn that we are reliable and our credibility will ensure our acceptance.

11. A trend that is to be applauded is investigative reporting. Unfortunately, only a thin invisible line separates investigative reporting from muck-raking. The world must have secrets which should not be exposed if relationship between nations is to be good. If every single thought about our friends are known to them, they will not remain friends. So, while investigative reporting is good, we should be careful not to allow such reports to degenerate into muck-raking.

12. As it is now, we in the Third World countries have far too long been suffering not only from the constant ill-treatment by the powerful Western agencies but also from the insufficient space given to us by the western newspapers as against what our media give them. This imbalanced pattern of news flow, as you often call it, is very much of concern to us in this country. Whatever the reasons for the current state of affairs, it is evident that this problem of information imbalance between the developed and developing countries can no longer be accepted by us in the Third World.

13. At this juncture I would like to relate my latest experience with those who govern media ethics. Recently an article on freedom of the press by me was published in a local newspaper. Three days ago I received a telegram from the International Press Institute which carried an implied threat to the image of our country. Yet the same telegram pointed out that the U.N. members had accepted human rights to include, "Freedom --- to impart ideas of all kinds ---". What I did was to impart my ideas through the media, an exercise of one of the human rights to which I am as entitled as anyone else. It is strange that an institute that is supposed to protect my right should seek to deny it. Yet when deliberate misreporting and agitations are carried out through the press, no comment is heard.

14. I realise that international organisations like this are very powerful. We have had several brushes with such organisations before and have been badly bruised. But in the name of press freedom itself, I refuse to be cowed by threats to our countries' image.

15. The Third World has suffered much from quote "the

freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers". While our frontiers have been breached again and again, we have not had the same capacity with regard to the frontiers of the countries which control world media. It is because the exercise of press freedom is so loaded in favour of the developed countries that we have tried to fight for a new world information and communication order. The UNESCO is very well aware of this. All the principles of the United Nations were written by developed countries before the developing countries were admitted as members. Now that the membership of the United Nations is greatly enlarged, some of the loaded principles should be reviewed. The western controlled international media have subverted the Governments of many developing countries until some are overthrown. The sad thing is that the Governments which took over are often less democratic than the maligned predecessor. Whatever Governments take over, they soon become subjects of international vilification by the western media.

16. While it is not my intention to interfere with your deliberations, I strongly feel that the time has now come for the Asian news exchange concept to be translated into reality as the first step towards the establishment of a New World Information and Communication Order.

17. In this connection, I am glad to learn that the proposal will be one of the main subjects for discussion at this assembly. This in itself has made the Kuala Lumpur OANA General Assembly more important than your previous assemblies. I am pleased to hear that this organization had for the past few years been actively pursuing the matter in the hope that a viable news exchange project could be launched as soon as possible. On its own, it had even taken the move to amend its statutes to accommodate the non-Asian news agencies to enable a wider participation in the proposed project. I was also told that numerous follow-up meetings have been held by several expert committees since the ASIOCOM Conference. It appears to me that what is needed now is a greater will to make the project a success.

18. The fact that more than twenty-three news agencies including those from the non-OANA member Pacific countries are attending this assembly is a clear manifestation of your seriousness of intention. In terms of technical requirement, I was given to understand that there is now a greatly felt need for the various telecommunication authorities to reduce their tariff rates to enable a more viable news exchange programme among the non profit-making news agencies of the region. It is my hope that this repeated call be heeded for our own mutual benefit.

19. Malaysia for our part, have already reduced the rate substantially. Although a substantial reduction of tariff rates would mean a great loss of revenue to us, I for one would not mind it if it is in the long term interest of the

region and its peoples. It is with this same spirit that I hope this move by us would be followed by the other countries in the region. We believe that an efficient network of news exchanges across Asia and the Pacific would not only facilitate the flow of news between and within the developing countries of the region but also from the region to the outside world bearing in mind the various bi-lateral and multi-lateral exchange arrangements already in operation by certain agencies.

20. It is my hope that the time would not be too long for us to see Asia's image being painted by Asians themselves rather than by outsiders who are neither sensitive to our needs and aspirations nor sympathetic to our cause. A just and equitable distribution of information within the region and outside it would inevitably help promote regional understanding and in the long run enhance further the co-operative efforts among the countries of the region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

21. With this hope , I hereby declare this fifth General Assembly of the Organization of Asian News Agencies opened.