

ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER AT THE
JOINT MEETING OF THE ASEAN STANDING
COMMITTEE AND SECRETARIES-GENERAL
WITH ASEAN PERMANENT COMMITTEE
CHAIRMAN IN KUALA LUMPUR ON 22ND
OCTOBER, 1974

Mr Chairman, Excellencies. Distinguished Participants and Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

We in Malaysia are honoured that Kuala Lumpur has been chosen as the venue for this very important gathering and I would like, at the very outset, to extend a special and very warm greeting to all participants from ASEAN member-countries especially those of you who have come from your Capitals for this meeting. I hope that your brief stay here, despite your heavy programme of work, will be pleasant and enjoyable. I know that Malaysian Delegations have always found their stay in the other ASEAN countries both delightful and memorable. I know, too, that Kuala Lumpur is a familiar city to most, if not all, of you. But please be assured that we stand ready to offer any assistance you may need to make your stay here as comfortable and productive as possible.

This gathering is a most important, indeed, a unique one in the history of ASEAN, for this is the first time that a joint meeting of all the ASEAN Committees is being held. Why has this meeting been called?—and Malaysia in particular has been a persistent advocate for such a meeting. Like all good travellers, I believe that we, the ASEAN countries, should, from time to time, pause in the course of our journey and take stock of our position to see how far we have progressed, what errors we may have committed and what lessons we can learn from past experience. We should then go on to examine the way ahead, what problems and prospects we can reasonably expect, and thereupon plan accordingly so as to reach our goal in the most expeditious way possible. That is your task at this meeting. It is a special and a heavy responsibility. Your deliberations are of crucial importance and they will have far-reaching consequences on the future of ASEAN and regionalism in Southeast Asia.

Distinguished Participants and Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

When I joined the Foreign Ministers of our neighbouring countries in signing the ASEAN Declaration in Bangkok in August, 1967, giving birth to ASEAN, I shared my colleagues conviction that the institution we were setting up would, in course of time, play an increasingly significant role in forging closer bonds of regional co-operation in Southeast Asia. Our intention—and I quote from the ASEAN Declaration "to establish a firm foundation for common action to promote regional co-operation in Southeast Asia" has by and large crystallized into reality. Indeed, ASEAN has evolved into the premier vehicle for regional co-operation in Southeast Asia.

As you are aware, the early years of ASEAN were beset with a host of teething problems. Especially when we recall those somewhat modest and hesitant beginnings, we can feel some sense of achievement at the momentum of co-operation which has since gathered pace and the fields of co-operative endeavours among us which have since widened. There are today eleven Permanent Committees and five Special Committees which seek to co-ordinate our joint efforts in such diverse fields as Tourism, Agriculture, Trade, Transportation and Culture. The past two years in particular have witnessed progress in the varied activities of ASEAN, in which I include, besides certain specific projects of co-operation among ourselves, the joint approaches we have made to the E.E.C. and also to Japan as well as the recent establishment of an important link with one of our friendly Pacific neighbours, Australia.

Let us, nevertheless, note frankly that the advances so far made on the plane of economic co-operation have been modest. Indeed, it is precisely because we value ASEAN—what it stands for and what it can achieve—that we must analyse the present state of our organisation as frankly and objectively as possible—even, I would say, in a most critical, but always constructive, spirit. We must not be lulled into a false sense of euphoria by mere forms of words. We must not allow ourselves to become self-satisfied. Like the little boy who pointed out that the Emperor had no clothes, we must have the courage to point to our own shortcomings—and to work out effective remedies. It is all very well to have so many Committees covering ostensibly so many areas of co-operation. It is all very well that they should be meeting, one Committee or

another, almost continuously throughout the year and that they should submit recommendations, numbering in the hundreds, to the Annual Foreign Ministers' Meeting. We must, however, go beyond mere form to the substance, beyond policies and projects on paper to actual action and results. Above all, therefore, I urge the utmost frankness in your deliberations. Only then can our limited achievements of the past few years serve as the launching pad for the evolution of more solid economic Co-operation in the years to come.

In this connection, some issues immediately spring to minds. There is need, I believe, for a serious examination of the actual effectiveness of ASEAN and of how to maximise these benefits at least cost. Is the institutional frame-work of ASEAN, which has grown over the years, the most effective and efficient or has it grown top-heavy and cumbersome? Are all the Committees which we have established strictly necessary and are all their meetings, which cost money and man-hours, strictly necessary? Let me rephrase these questions in another way: Can we not improve on the present ASEAN institutional framework? Is there not overlapping and duplication in the work of some of the ASEAN Committees? Is their present method of working the most effective or have the frequency and familiarity of our meetings led to a loss of urgency and critical appraisal? Can we not rationalise and stream-line these Committees and their working methods?

Or again there is a danger, it seems to me, that ASEAN may become the special concern and pre-occupation only of those officials in the respective National Secretariats and of others involved in the day-to-day running of ASEAN. We must ask ourselves: What is really the public sentiment at the grass-root, popular level towards ASEAN? What is the attitude of the other bureaucrats and technocrats in the different agencies of our respective Governments and also in the private sector? How much of their time and attention are taken up with ASEAN issues and at what level in their hierachy are ASEAN problems dealt with? Would not the institution of a high-level National Council or Commission for ASEAN in our respective countries ensure more beneficial and effective co-operation?

What I have said, is of course, merely indicative, and by no means exhaustive, of the questions which you would have to address yourselves to in the course of your deliberations. I have

touched on them in some detail because I believe they raise serious and fundamental issues which will affect the future of ASEAN and because I believe that these deliberations of yours are, if I may repeat myself, of critical importance.

Your meeting today therefore marks a historic stage in the development of ASEAN, for the time has now come for us to examine carefully our progress and performance against our goals, and to assess objectively the successes and failures of our organisation. In terms of concrete forms of co-operation, I feel that some significant beginnings have been made. Let us now, Mr Chairman, raise ourselves from the foundations we have laid to new heights of endeavour and thereby give more substance to our concept of co-operation.

At this stage, I would like to refer to the establishment of the Permanent ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta. The establishment of the Secretariat is a logical step forward in the consolidation of our organisation and the promotion of cohesion. As the establishment of the Secretariat would commit ASEAN to long-term projections and programmes, proper guidelines and directions are mandatory from the outset.

It is my view that the interests of ASEAN will best be served if the role and functions of the Secretariat are initially oriented towards assisting the several ASEAN Committees and National Secretariats in discharging their functions more effectively and efficiently. I also feel that ASEAN should start off with a small Secretariat to establish an effective nucleus for an action-oriented role. Let the Secretariat be given time to grow as and when the need arises. I believe anything that is to be permanent and useful must have an element of growth. In the final analysis, it is results which matter. We must avoid having a big organisational structure which raises hopes and expectations of our people and in the end only bring disappointment and frustration.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

In the course of your deliberations, you would also examine, I am sure, some further areas of ASEAN co-operation. These are clearly areas in which ASEAN countries can effectively co-operate together: there are also areas in which, for one reason or another, we cannot. These political and economic realities cannot simply be washed away. We will do no service to ASEAN if we raise

unrealistic expectations over these difficulties and differences by various forms of words and by making proposals which simply will not get off the ground. We must, at all times, be guided by a sense of the practical and the realistic. We should identify specific projects, even if limited in character, which have prospects of success. Only in this way, by building on success, can we create the momentum to wider fields of co-operation and achievements.

Our joint approaches to the E.E.C. and to Japan, which I have mentioned earlier, are some examples of what I have in mind. One other field which should be considered is in the marketing of some of our primary commodities. The ASEAN countries, for example, are the most significant producers of such commodities as rubber, tin, palm-oil and timber which in many cases are the mainstay of our economies. In the face of the unsettled international economic conditions through which we are going, it is both wise and realistic that we should co-operate together in the marketing of these commodities in the international markets to ensure fair and reasonable price for these commodities. This surely is one area of co-operation which sets fair for success and which can clearly be of immediate benefit to all of us. ASEAN countries by co-operating together will demonstrate their strength and their unity which will certainly have an international impact. In this way, the significance of ASEAN will be enhanced both in the short-term by producing clearly discernible benefits to our respective economies and in the longer-term by strengthening the fabric of our co-operative efforts built upon success in specific instances.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

I have reiterated on several occasions that Malaysia, in its scale of foreign policy priorities, accords primacy to ASEAN for it is the first truly indigenous organisation in the region that has the potential for developing into a valuable and viable institution to serve the needs of Southeast Asia. It is in this spirit that Malaysia has been a consistent advocate for strengthening the efficacy of ASEAN and it is in this spirit also that I have spoken so frankly this morning.

Let me not, however, be misunderstood. It is true that nothing very dramatic has hitherto been achieved at ASEAN meetings, but each of us has been made aware of the regional implications

of many of our domestic proposals and actions. Viewed in this perspective, ASEAN, during the seven years of its existence, has made some progress in establishing among us a genuine and growing habit of thinking and working together in regional terms. The constant coming together of officials at various Committee meetings of ASEAN coupled with the annual meeting of ASEAN Ministers have served to bring member-countries closer together, creating a climate of goodwill and understanding and fostering the evolution of regional solidarity. The most salient achievement of ASEAN has been its contribution towards developing regional political consensus and cohesion that may well usher the evolution of a Community of Southeast Asia which would take its rightful place as a viable, self-reliant unit within the comity of nations.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

As we draw close towards the end of the first decade of ASEAN and reach the threshold of the second stage of ASEAN's life, we cannot avoid noticing that the expectations of our peoples have been kindles. We should accordingly imbue ourselves with a renewed sense of determination to forge ahead systematically and rapidly in the direction of enhanced regional co-operation, to fulfil the expectations of our peoples.

While our endeavours in the past have yielded quite satisfying results in fulfilling the modest promise of ASEAN, new challenges have now made their appearance. We are living in times of world economic crisis and unstable monetary conditions which, if not remedied in time, could wrack havoc on the economies of our countries and the social wellbeing of our peoples. Spiralling inflation and critical shortages or escalating costs of food, energy and the material pre-requisites essential for development are serious problems confronting individual nations and the international economy as a whole. We should address ourselves to these problems with a sense of urgency and initiate immediate co-operative action to ameliorate adverse conditions arising from these problems. I realise that this is a persistently uphill task in present-day conditions but if we move forward to achieve a more cohesive and purposeful ASEAN, not only would prospects for national economic development be considerably enhanced but ASEAN's capacity to withstand the economic strains and stresses generated by an unstable world economic order would be fortified.

Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen.

ASEAN is today a reality: that no one can deny us. The existence of ASEAN is a fact of international political life and ASEAN has entered the international political vocabulary. ASEAN and the concept of a Southeast Asian regionalism is central to the preoccupation of our respective Governments: it is certainly central to my own Government. Let us therefore do what we can to strengthen our organisation. Your discussions, conducted as I am sure it will be, in the traditional ASEAN spirit of goodwill, informality and friendliness, and inspired by a sense of history and our commitment to future generations, will serve to guide us in the years ahead. Indeed, the future of ASEAN and of regionalism in Southeast Asia depends a great deal on how well and how effectively you carry out your tasks at this meeting. You have been entrusted with a heavy, indeed a historic, responsibility. I wish you God-speed in your deliberations.

It now gives me great pleasure to declare this meeting open.



Tun Abdul Razak bin Datuk Hussein sedang diperkenalkan kepada para Wakil di Majlis Pembukaan Penggal Ke 15 Majlis Timah Antarabangsa di Hotel Equatorial, Kuala Lumpur pada 24hb Oktober, 1974.

(Gambar Jabatan Penerangan Malaysia)