

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER AT THE
OPENING CEREMONY OF THE ILO/ECAFE
ASIAN SYMPOSIUM ON LABOUR AND
POPULATION POLICIES AT DEWAN TUNKU
ABDUL RAHMAN, KUALA LUMPUR ON 24TH
JULY, 1972

Mr. Chairman, Y.B. Tan Sri Manikavasagam,¹ Hon'ble Ministers,
Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is a pleasure for me to be here this morning to declare open
the ILO-ECAFE Symposium on Labour and Population Policies in
Asia.

I should like to thank the organisers, namely the International
Labour Organisation and ECAFE for this honour and for having
chosen Kuala Lumpur as the venue for this important meeting.

To the distinguished participants gathered here, I wish them
Selamat Datang and I sincerely hope that your stay in our Capital
will be both fruitful and memorable.

Needless to say, a gathering such as this is highly valued, for it
affords us an opportunity to make use of the ILO's unique tripartite
structure.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

For the next few days, you will be discussing one of the most
complex and challenging human problems facing us in the Second
Development Decade (1970-80) and after. In this regard, no
preventive measures can be taken as the problem is already with
us. Children born during the past two decades, who constitute
about half the total population of the Asian Region, have already
begun to enter the labour force in increasing numbers.

It may be possible, however, through family planning pro-
grammes and activities, to reduce the number of children brought
into this crowded world, but those who are already born must be
provided with food, clothing, housing, medical facilities, education

¹ Y.B. Menteri Buruh dan Tenaga Rakyat.

and training and adequate job opportunities. Every single day there are born in this region 25,000 more young human beings who have to be fed and educated, to be trained both in mind and body so as to fit them for employment later. The magnitude of the problem can be gauged if we realise that in every two seconds, a second baby is born somewhere between Korea and Iran. This means that by the end of the day today, the countries have to put into active service three more trained doctors, five more trained nurses, ten more midwives, 750 new classrooms, and 750 new trained teachers—all these by midnight, tonight.

According to U.N. projections, the world population is expected to double itself by the turn of the century with more than three people out of four living in the developing countries. On the other hand, the biologists say that the earth is already overpopulated in relation to available resources and the requirements of a reasonably satisfying existence.

It is, therefore, imperative that peoples and governments must take a new look at the problem of population with a view toward enhancing the quality of life. Until recently, population limitation has been considered neither possible nor desirable by some countries and there is still tendency to avoid the issue even in the face of abundant evidence that very large numbers of people could not be supported.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our concern with growing population problem stems from the fact that each year an increasing number of men and women are entering the employment market. Until recently, economists tended to regard unemployment as a symptom of under-development which would disappear as development proceeded. If this were in fact so, it would be sufficient to concentrate on promoting rapid economic growth and development, and employment could look after itself.

But, this is not in fact the case. On the contrary, countries that are undergoing rapid economic growth without population control are still faced with increasing unemployment. Therefore, it can safely be said that rapid growth rates hinder economic development and our efforts to support a growing population are bound to result in much more stress and strain.

Talking of our own experience in Malaysia, the rapid economic progress today will be meaningless tomorrow if we do not devote our efforts simultaneously to check the prevailing high rate of population growth. It is therefore clear that the time has come for us to take stock of our resources, reappraise our national objectives, give serious thought to the optimum population size. With the passage of time, both technological change and cultural evolution will inevitably change the optima. Therefore, all governments, including eventually a world governmental body, must be ready to encourage appropriate population trends just as we now intervene in attempts to produce desired economic trends.

In other words, the size of the human population has to be brought under control. The number of children that couples may have will not simply be the number of children they desire to have but will take into account the children's future well-being as well as the social and physical environmental factors. In order to achieve population control, we will have to bring about extraordinary changes in human attitudes—in the attitude of our people. These changes will inevitably trouble men's minds: changing people's views on birth control is one of the greatest challenges facing humanity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The implications of population growth in a number of fields are not generally recognised. In fact, the entrants to the labour market for the next fifteen years are already born and that no family planning policy can make any difference to the number of unemployed for that period. To a certain extent, the new entrants will be absorbed in vacancies created in existing jobs by deaths and retirements, but with improved health and expectation of life, there is a gradual increase in the working life which thereby reduces the rate of absorption. Taking these and the population growth into account, new jobs have to be created for roughly half to nearly two-thirds of the new entrants. However, we know that most countries are incapable of steadily creating jobs at this rate and this naturally leads to mounting unemployment.

It is, therefore, some satisfaction to see that the Resolution on the Second U.N. Development Decade adopted with effect from 1st January 1971, expressly requires each country to formulate its

demographic objectives within the framework of its national development plan and specified a growth target not only a GNP growth rate of 6% per annum but also a per capita rate of 3.5% representing a doubling of average income per head in the course of two decades. The Resolution also expressly includes a number of social goals beginning with significant reduction of unemployment and under-employment and ending with involvement of youths and women in the development process.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Perhaps the greatest hazard to Asian population and the future of Asian societies today lies in the permanent inclination to see and struggle with immediate crises rather than to alter the outgoing process that underline the crises. Nowhere is this more true than in population. The neglect of the problems of reducing the population inflows is perhaps the greatest of the demographic hazards of the "seventies". It is therefore clear that neither the miracle of the green revolution, nor the recent technological break-through has succeeded in removing the need for a population policy in Asia.

In this context, I should like to mention Japan's success in reducing its birth rate rapidly after World War II. An important feature in the spread of family planning during the last two decades was the introduction of Industry-based programmes specifically designed for workers and their families with the co-operation of employers and trade unions. The concomittant result is the decline in birth rate and the rapid fall in induced abortions. The social policy which was promoted through massive educational and communications programmes, very strongly discourages having a family with more than two children.

We in Malaysia are somewhat fortunate in having started off well with our Family Planning programme. We have the National Family Planning Board looking after our population problem and this Board is directly under my portfolio. We have been very realistic right from the start of our programme. With our urbanisation project and with the keen support of all in the form of direct involvement extending supplementary and complementary efforts to the Board, the national family planning programme has made substantial contribution in governmental efforts towards economic progress.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am particularly happy and gratified that ILO should put its efforts in organising this Symposium because this will provide an opportunity to policy-makers and planners, employers and trade unionists to exchange information, knowledge and experience with regard to inter-relationship between population problems, on one hand; and labour, economic and social development problems, on the other.

More specifically, this will bring into focus the unity of efforts by the various groups to find ways and means of overcoming problems in industrialised sectors and labour groups—in terms of family planning—which will bring about social justice, economic advancement and the improvement of human life in this—our vital part of the world.

With these remarks, Ladies and Gentlemen, I have great pleasure in declaring the Symposium open.