

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER AT THE  
OPENING OF THE INTERNATIONAL CON-  
FERENCE ON SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES AT  
DEWAN TUNKU CHANCELLOR, UNIVERSITY  
OF MALAYA, KUALA LUMPUR ON 23RD  
FEBRUARY, 1972

Mr Chairman, Mr Vice-Chancellor University of Malaya, Dr David E. Pfanner, Deputy Representative Ford Foundation, Bangkok, Your Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is an honour and a pleasure for me to be here this morning to declare open this International Conference on Southeast Asian Studies.

I would like, first of all, to congratulate the University of Malaya and the Ford Foundation for their joint effort in sponsoring the Conference, which has made it possible for scholars of this region and outside to come together at this meeting.

I would also like to extend my congratulations to the members of the Planning Committee, who, I am given to understand, are indigenous Southeast Asian Scholars themselves—for having chosen an important theme for discussion.

The theme "Development—Human Resources and Issues"—represents a subject which is faced in common by all the developing countries in this region. For me personally, it is a subject in which I have an abiding interest, although my interest might have been more that of a politician rather than an academician.

It is almost a truism to say that "Development"—spelt with a capital "D" is the one all-embracing concern of the emerging nations in this region, in particular, and in the whole world, in general. There is not a single country's leadership today that is not committed, in varying degrees to the development of their respective countries. Indeed, the idea of "Development" has got hold of the imagination of our peoples from the ordinary peasant to the highest executives, from the intellectuals to the man-in-the-street.

In point of fact, there is a rising level of expectations in everyone's mind—of almost revolutionary proportions—that with “Development” successfully achieved, all the past and present ills in our society would vanish and everybody would be able to live as in the fairy tale—“happily ever after!”

But, here is the crux of the problem. Firstly, “Development” means many things to many people. Depending on one's particular predisposition and persuasion, it may mean sheer economic development or the upliftment in the material aspects of life.

In this sense, it means a better life—better food, clothing, shelter and all the other material things which make life more comfortable.

In another sense, “Development” is taken to mean the overall human development, involving a gradual upliftment of the spiritual aspect of man to a higher stage of advancement in his life. And to back this argument, we Asians have for centuries past, prided ourselves of our spiritual superiority in that all the great religions of the world—Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam—found their roots in Asia.

Accordingly, therefore, there exists two main viewpoints concerning the concept of “Development”: the first we may call the materialistic concept and the second we may label as the spiritualistic. They represent two diametrically opposed viewpoints, each having its own philosophical connotation and each seemingly irreconcilable to the other. For, while the former seems to be a moral in outlook, the latter is deeply involved with specifically moral issues.

Mr Chairman, Distinguished Delegates,

It is in this area of apparent conflict of philosophies of action that I suggest the social scientists and the humanists could possibly make their contribution. Armed with their analytical tools, their conceptual framework and theories, the social scientists could very well embark upon a much more intensive and extensive empirical studies of the conditions of the societies in this region. Alongside with the social scientists, the humanists with their fund of cultural knowledge and including religious and philosophical values, could help identify the meaning and significance of these areas of life.

On the immediate and short-term objective in our development efforts, there is, I think, no dispute.

We are all agreed that the basic material requirements of living of our peoples should be lifted. Because of years of neglect and lack of planned development in the past, they have generally remained poor, eking out a living at mere subsistence level.

This is why, as far as it concerns us in Malaysia, we have emphasised more the economic and the material aspects in our early phase of development efforts.

Through the modernization of agricultural techniques, industrialisation programmes and the training of skilled manpower, etc., it has been possible for us to achieve a growth in productivity and consequently a higher national income than before. And this, of course, we will continue to do in the next few decades.

However, we may not be very clear on what the fundamental and long-term goal in our development efforts should be. The very idea of "Development" begs so many fundamental questions.

For instance, at the end of this long road, what would be the shape and pattern of our society? Do we wish to see our respective Southeast Asian societies as mere carbon copies of the industrialized western societies?

The past experience of the Industrial Revolution in the West—some economists are already suggesting that a post-Industrial Revolution has already taken place in the West—should, I think, be object lessons for us to draw upon.

If we adopt the Western model, for instance, are we clear in our minds on the implications of such a process of economic development upon the social and cultural fabric of our societies? And, if we are already clear, what do we do and how do we go about preparing ourselves and our peoples against the "future-shock" that these massive social and cultural changes would bring? For, inevitably the future society will not resemble any more the society that we have inherited today.

Alternatively, should we look at other models for adoption and adaptation to suit our particular environments. Or should we hope solely for the ingenuity of our own peoples to generate a social and political system uniquely of our own making?

Whatever may be the case, one thing is certain. We do have alternative courses of action before us. And, we could, if we so wish, exercise our option wisely so that the future society that we wish to see would emerge here in our region. As a country now in the midst of development, we have one distinct advantage. We have the benefit of the experience of the developed countries from which we can draw our lessons.

Mr Chairman, Distinguished Delegates,

I trust, therefore, that in your deliberations for the next few days, you would not fail to touch upon or even explore in greater details, these varied but fundamental aspects of the development problems and issues. I am sure that their further delineation and elaboration would be of interest to us all.

As we all know, no proper development is possible without having available resources at our disposal. Further, the quality of such resources, both human and material, would also determine the rate of development in any particular area. Of the two, I would regard human resources and their quality as the over-riding factor, for after all, it is largely the ingenuity of the human resources that has shaped development in all countries.

I am, therefore, pleased to note that this Conference will be discussing human resources in relation to development. I also note that the question of human resources is coupled with human issues. This is the right approach for in development efforts in particular, the combination of human problems and issues often looms so large as to influence the rate and even the directions of development.

On these complex of human problems and issues, I would like to single out one area for special mention. It is a problem area in which we in Malaysia are concentrating our utmost effort with the hope of resolving it successfully.

Malaysia, in common with several other countries in this region, has inherited a situation in which peoples of diverse ethnic and cultural groups and origins have come to make this country their own. The problem before us is one of welding this ethnic and cultural plurality and diversity into a unity which is demanded by the term Malaysian.

But, our task is compounded by the fact that in the past these ethnic groups had been left to develop separately, in their own ways and direction. This has resulted not only in the perpetuation of the ethnic and cultural distinctions, but in several aspects have even sharpened the edges of these cultural barriers. The situation is made more complex since the various ethnic groups have become distinctly identifiable in terms of their distribution by occupation and locality.

We have here in Malaysia a major and a twofold task in our efforts of nation-building. Firstly, we have to restructure our society and secondly we have to integrate our diverse ethnic and cultural communities into one viable unity.

I am happy to note that one of your Working Seminars will be discussing precisely this subject of national integration. In this respect, I am sure that you would be guided in your deliberations by the canons of scientific inquiry of your various academic disciplines as well as by the realization that it is of vital necessity for us in Southeast Asia to achieve this objective for the sake of our future well-being.

Mr Chairman, Distinguished Delegates,

Looking at the programme, I see that you have a heavy working schedule laid out by the organisers of the Conference. However, in spite of this, I hope you would be able to have some time off to see a little of this country during your stay and meet our people as they go about their daily life.

I am indeed pleased to see that this is truly a gathering of scholars most of whom are Southeast Asians. I regard this as another milestone in regional co-operation amongst academicians in this region in line with the spirit of ASEAN and such other efforts at regional co-operation like the Association of Southeast Asian Institute of Higher Learning and Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Conference. Efforts like this will definitely help to encourage and sustain the concept of regionalism, self-reliance and initiative in solving our common problems ourselves.

I have much pleasure in declaring this Conference and wish you all success in your deliberations.