

ADDRESS OF WELCOME BY THE PRIME MINISTER AT THE OPENING OF THE TWENTY FIFTH SESSION OF THE W.H.O. REGIONAL COMMITTEE MEETING FOR THE WESTERN PACIFIC REGION AT DEWAN TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN, KUALA LUMPUR ON 2ND SEPTEMBER, 1974

Mr Chairman, Hon'ble Ministers, Your Excellencies, The Regional Director of W.H.O., Dr Dy, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am indeed honoured to have this opportunity to address the distinguished representatives of W.H.O. member countries in the Western Pacific Region, representatives of the various International Organisations represented here today, the Regional Director for the Western Pacific Region, Dr Dy and his staff.

It is indeed a double honour for Malaysia to host this twenty fifth Session of the Regional Committee Meeting as it coincides with the Silver Anniversary of the Regional Office of the W.H.O. and immediately after our own National Day celebrations.

I must thank all the delegates of this Region for having so graciously accepted our invitation during the twenty third Session held in Guam in 1972 for this memorable Session to be held in Kuala Lumpur. On behalf of the Government and people of Malaysia, I extend you a warm welcome—Selamat Datang—and wish you a pleasant stay here.

It is my belief (and I am sure all of you will agree with me) that the holding of the Regional Committee Meetings in various member-countries provides us a better knowledge of the peoples of the region and the health situations of the various countries. At the same time, it also helps improve mutual relationship, understanding and respect between member-governments and strengthen our confidence in the World Health Organisation.

Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen.

We in Malaysia were fortunate to inherit a relatively sound health service-structure from the colonial administration at the time of our independence eighteen years ago. However, the

distribution and particularly the quality of the health services we inherited varied from State to State and also between areas within a State. The services were mainly concentrated in the urban areas whereas the rural areas, where more than 70% of our population lived, lacked adequate medical, health and dental facilities. It was, therefore, a formidable task for our Ministry of Health to rectify this mal-distribution between the urban and rural areas and at the same time to up-grade the quality of the services and harmonise it quantity-wise between the various states. This is all the more important today in keeping with the prime objectives of the New Economic Policy of my Government to eradicate poverty and inequalities no matter where they exist. Upon this firm foundation, we hope to build a strong, progressive, and united Nation out of our multi-racial society.

We are thankful for the staunch support and should advice of the World Health Organisation in our efforts in re-structuring our health services, not only in overcoming our immediate and pressing health problems but also in satisfying the hopes and aspirations of our people. I would like to express my appreciation to the Ministry of Health and its officials for their dedication, diligence and dynamism, which have, within the short span of less than two decades, succeeded in re-shaping the health services of this country to conform to the desired objectives. The imbalance in distribution has now been rectified and, today, there is hardly any area around the country without the basic medical, health and dental facilities.

Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen.

In correcting the imbalance in the distribution of our health services, inadequate communication or inaccessible terrain and the like have not been an impediment to bring essential health services to our remote and widely scattered isolated population. For instance, in Sarawak, where almost 85% of the population live in isolated long-houses in the far reaches which, in some cases take up to three weeks to reach by normal means of transport, we have introduced the Flying Doctor Service.

Today, these remote places are visited regularly and the people there can enjoy necessary medical and health services. Seriously ill-cases are evacuated to hospitals within a matter of hours. This and other innovations have ensured our isolated population with

proper medical and health care which has brought about considerable improvement to their standard of living.

Although we have made much progress in this field, we are not complacent and will continue to improve and expand our services further. Having expanded the services so rapidly, we need now to consolidate our gains and fortify our efforts. As you all know, medicine is not a static science and everyday we hear of new discoveries in specialised areas. We must keep up with this so that our citizens can be assured of the highest standard of health and quality of life all the time.

Furthermore, health is a challenging field—no sooner is a problem solved than another one emerges. The economic successes we have gained and the relative affluence, brought in its wake new and even complicated health problems among our people. The changing patterns and mode of living further create problems in health. Industrialisation, urbanization and land development invariably bring about problems such as pollution, occupational diseases and hazards, coronary diseases and industrial accidents. In short, as soon as there is a change in the environment or ecology, we can expect a health problem will emerge. This is in fact the beginning and not the end, and I am confident that the versatility and resilience with which our respective health authorities has been able to encounter these problems in the past, it will be able to face these challenges with confidence and courage in future.

Here in Malaysia, our most urgent task is to overcome the acute shortage of trained staff at all levels. While I am happy to note that the shortage of para-medical staff will soon be a thing of the past, there is still the shortage in the professional grades. We believe that the best way to overcome this is to establish our own post-graduate training institutions like the Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons. Only recently we established the Colleges of Surgeons, Physicians, and General Practitioners, with the co-operation and assistance of medical counterparts from overseas from where almost all our specialists have been trained. These Colleges will conduct Courses and hold examinations leading to specialist qualifications in the various disciplines.

It is my hope to see that Malaysia attains professional independence ultimately. In gaining professional independence

our Colleges will be playing a very important role. It will also strive to maintain the close established professional links with the Sister Colleges overseas. The aim is not only to bring people of the same profession from nations together but also to maintain a high standard of professional practice in Malaysia. We therefore appreciate very much all the assistance we can get from W.H.O. and from member-countries in this direction.

Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen.

In his address just now, the Minister of Health has expressed his growing concern regarding dengue haemorrhagic fever which has grown from endemic to epidemic proportions. This problem is not confined to Malaysia alone but to many countries in this region. I am happy to know that one of the topics of your technical discussions during this session will be specifically on dengue haemorrhagic fever. I would like to request W.H.O. to collaborate and co-ordinate the various research programmes that are presently being carried out on dengue haemorrhagic fever by various institutions and organisations both within and outside this region, with a view to advising member-countries on the latest methods and procedures in combating this growing menace. W.H.O. should also set up research studies or programmes on other aspects of this disease which are not currently being covered. The Malaysian Institute for Medical Research has had a long and well-known success history in tropical diseases and I would like to offer the facilities and services of this Institute to assist in any study on research programmes in this field.

Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am convinced that the holding of this Meeting in Kuala Lumpur would prove to be a source of inspiration to our Ministry of Health in their endeavours to improve the standard of health services in this country. The free exchange of views and knowledge would be of mutual benefit to all participants of this meeting. However, I hope that inspite of your busy programme, you will find some time to acquaint yourself with our people and the Malaysian way of life, so that your short stay in Malaysia will be both happy and memorable. At the same time, I also hope that you will have an interesting and fruitful deliberations.

Thank you.