

By : DATO' SRI MOHD NAJIB TUN ABD RAZAK
Venue :
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Title : 7TH ASEAN HEALTH MINISTERS MEETING

- Honourable Tan Sri Dr. Koh Tsu Koon, Chief Minister of Penang,
- Honourable Dato' Dr. Chua Soi Lek, Minister of Health Malaysia
- Your Excellencies, the Honourable Ministers of Health from the ASEAN Member Countries,
- Your Excellency Dr. Wilfrido V. Villacorta, the Deputy Secretary-General of ASEAN,
- Respected ASEAN Member Country delegates,
- Distinguished Representatives from the World Health Organisation,
- Distinguished guests,
- Ladies and Gentlemen.

A very good morning to all of you.

On behalf of the Government of Malaysia, I wish to extend a warm welcome to all of you to the Seventh ASEAN Health Ministers Meeting here in this island State of Penang. We are honoured to host this Meeting and we do hope that it will be one that is successful and memorable.

I wish to thank all of you for setting aside some time to enable yourselves to attend this important meeting, which is nothing less than the convergence of the leading minds in the shaping of the region's health policies, and a wonderful avenue to showcase yet another facet of the ASEAN spirit of regional cooperation.

Honourable Ministers, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure that to note that the theme of the Meeting is 'Health Without Frontiers'. This theme is apt in view of the current challenges posed by health-related issues in a borderless world, which require increased trans-boundary cooperation and collaboration. This is truly in keeping with the regional spirit of total cooperation that has been well established in ASEAN.

I am confident that this Meeting would be able to make substantive contributions towards increased cooperation in health related issues especially in the wake of recent outbreaks of disease, which have had devastating effects on the region as a whole. I sincerely hope that this meeting will further strengthen an already solid bond of cooperation amongst ASEAN Members and other partner countries. This I believe, will in

turn contribute to maintaining prosperity and development in the region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I understand that the First of the ASEAN + 3 Health Ministers Meeting is scheduled to be held tomorrow. This would include delegates from our partner countries: Japan, the People's Republic of China, and the Republic of Korea.

During the Sixth ASEAN Health Ministers Meeting hosted by the Lao Peoples Democratic Republic from 14 to 15 March 2002 in Vientiane, it was agreed to consider the possibility of forging closer cooperation in the health sector with the "Plus Three Countries" namely China, Japan and Korea, in response to the initiative of the Informal ASEAN Plus Three Summit held in Manila in November 1999. At that Meeting they believed that ASEAN Member Countries would stand to benefit from this new cooperation approach, particularly in such areas as traditional and western medicines as well as networking on infectious diseases.

Tomorrow we will witness the fruits of this venture with the presence of our partners from the Plus 3 Countries and I ask you to join me in warmly welcoming them into our rapidly expanding fraternity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We appreciate the role played especially by the Ministers of Health in establishing the close collaboration in the health sector among the ASEAN Member Countries over the years. The ASEAN Health Ministers Meetings have played a significant role in the development of the health sector in the region and I am convinced that both this Seventh ASEAN Health Ministers Meeting and the First ASEAN + 3 Health Ministers Meeting will be equally successful and will ensure increased cooperation on health issues which would in turn benefit the entire Region.

I understand that two important health related activities have been identified for deliberation by technical groups during this period. One being the Special Meeting of the ASEAN Expert Group on Communicable Diseases and the other is the ASEAN Ad Hoc Working Group Meeting on Traditional Medicine / Complementary and Alternative Medicine. These are two areas where there is a great need for technical collaboration and capability enhancement based on common concerns and needs.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The area of Traditional Medicine / Complementary and Alternative Medicine is one that should be of great interest

to ASEAN. Our ASEAN countries are blessed with an abundance of medicinal plants of breathtaking variety and other natural resources, the medicinal potential of which have not been fully tapped. We also share a similar history of inheriting deep, culturally-rooted practices in traditional medicine. Now with the inclusion as partners of China, Japan and Korea -countries with vast resources and knowledge in traditional medicine-, the wealth of resources knowledge and experience in traditional medicine that we possess collectively is immeasurable and indeed invaluable. The potential of traditional medicine is enormous and could bring great benefits to the entire region, both in economic terms and in respect to new discoveries in treatment and healthcare.

Over the last decade, the use of Traditional Medicine / Complementary and Alternative Medicine has been gaining popularity across the globe. It is not only used in the primary health care of developing countries, but is also used in developed countries where allopathic medicine is predominant in the health care system. The World Health Organisation (WHO) reported that about 80% and 60% of the population of the developing and developed countries respectively, use Traditional Medicine / Complementary and Alternative Medicine in their health care deliveries.

As such, it is appropriate that the role of safe and effective traditional and complementary medicine be recognized and considered for integration into the national healthcare system, as called by the World Health Organization in the Declaration of Alma- Ata in 1978.

WHO in facilitating the member countries for the this recommendation, developed the "WHO Traditional Medicine Strategy 2002 to 2005" report. The report emphasized that in order to facilitate its implementation, a number of issues such as policy, safety, efficacy and quality, access and rational use of Traditional and Complementary Medicine should be addressed.

It is therefore very timely that this ASEAN Health Ministers meeting will deliberate on Traditional and Complementary Medicine. I was informed that the Ad-hoc Working Group on Traditional and Complementary Medicine has identified common issues amongst countries in the region and has proposed some framework of cooperation.

This framework has been presented and endorsed by the senior officials meeting and is up for deliberation by the ASEAN Ministers today. We look forward for official endorsement in this new and challenging endeavor.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

ASEAN as a region has had its share of challenges in the management of public health. The outbreaks of Severe Acute

Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Avian Flu (Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza) still linger in our collective memories and we know all too well the negative impact the outbreaks have had on our countries. The diseases have raised public health concerns and awareness to new heights by demonstrating with grave clarity the devastating effects of a wide scale outbreak of communicable diseases.

The economic aftermath of SARS has been serious. Especially so for a closely interconnected and interdependent region like ours. A recent survey (conducted by a regional publication) on Government statements and reports from financial institutions on the impact of SARS so far has put the damage to Asian economies in the region of USD 10.6 billion (RM 40.3 billion) and could eventually total as much as USD 50 billion.

Meanwhile, there is an increased threat of epidemics and the emergence of new infections as pathogens jump species barriers. Drug-resistant forms of existing diseases are also appearing, and the potential for these to spread rapidly is very real. New diseases, like Avian Flu, SARS and Nipah Encephalitis, have been emerging at the rate of one per year for the last 20 years or more and the trend is certain to continue. These diseases would not be the last of their kind to spread rapidly due to modern global conditions. The world it seems shall never be free from the threat of epidemics.

Epidemics challenge the capacity of health systems to respond. They disrupt control programmes of high burden diseases, (such as tuberculosis, malaria and AIDS), and undermine the stability needed for eradication and elimination programmes. SARS has brought interdependence and the need for international cooperation strongly to the fore.

The outbreak has highlighted the need for more effective and coordinated early warning surveillance and communication mechanisms to warn against threats to public health. Rapid and effective regional response mechanisms will contribute much to long-term epidemic preparedness and capacity building for combating any future outbreaks of communicable diseases.

In her battles with Nipah Encephalitis and more recently, SARS, Malaysia has learned that well planned pre-emptive public health measures are vital in avoiding disastrous post-outbreak consequences as witnessed elsewhere. Malaysia acted precisely, and expeditiously and left nothing to chance and was successful in halting the spread of the diseases. The public health measures instituted were clear and decisively implemented.

But above all of this, the importance of international and regional cooperation cannot be over emphasized. The

collaboration and cooperation of countries in and around the region went a long way in our success in containment of the outbreaks.

It is heartening to note that during the SARS crisis many countries cooperated and coordinated their efforts in combating the spread of the disease. To take a simple example, the temperature screening of out-bound passengers at international airports of various affected countries, was a very visible demonstration of this cooperation. It is hoped that such coordination and unity of purpose among different countries towards battling disease will continue in the event that similar crises should re-emerge in the future.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This Meeting is an excellent forum for deliberations in common areas of health concerns through regional networking. I genuinely hope that this Meeting would lead to the strengthening of partnerships in intra-regional management of health issues and concerns.

I hope that your deliberations here would be fruitful and that they would lead to the Region being better prepared to tackle health issues effectively and efficiently.

I believe that all of us wish to see better days ahead for our countries. I believe we all have a vision of excellence in healthcare for our nations, and I believe that we all hope and dream of a time when we will not have to suffer the deaths of our people due to diseases that could have been prevented and contained. Therefore I believe that we all understand the importance of this Meeting as yet another crucial step forward on the journey towards attaining that vision.

On that note It gives me great pleasure to officially declare the Seventh ASEAN Health Ministers Meeting open.

Thank you.

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
Putrajaya