

SPEECH BY
YAB DATO' SERI ABDULLAH BIN HAJI AHMAD BADAWI
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Terlebih dahulu, saya ingin mengucapkan terima kasih kepada Kementerian Sains, Teknologi dan Alam Sekitar di atas undangan untuk merasmikan "Persidangan Antarabangsa Mengenai Bahaya Kebakaran Hutan dan Tanah" yang julung-julung kali diadakan di rantau ini. Saya yakin persidangan ini akan mengukuhkan jaringan persahabatan dan kerjasama, khususnya di antara negara- negara Asean. Ia turut akan membawa pelbagai faedah kepada usaha pemuliharaan alam sekitar di rantau kita bersama.

2. Allow me to bid you a warm welcome to Malaysia, especially for our guests from the ASEAN region and around the world. It is a pleasure for me to be here today to officiate the opening of this important conference. It is also a source of personal pride for me to later witness the signing of a historic ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution. This event and the agreement signal a clear intention on the part of Asean to address environmental issues collectively and responsibly.

3. After all, We now live in an era of interdependence, more than ever before. Our actions have repercussions on our neighbours and on the planet. While countries could "go it alone" in the past, it is no longer possible or even desirable for anyone to live in isolation. We interact, communicate, trade, travel and live together on "mother earth". We have but the one atmosphere and the one marine system. Our natural resources are finite. Above all, our basic needs do not differ - clean water, fresh air, unpolluted land, food on the table, clothes to wear and a roof over our heads.

4. This conference therefore takes on significant meaning. The experiences and consequences of the haze pollution arising from the land and forest fires in 1997 and 1998 have brought into sharp focus the complexity and magnitude of the problem. While there was no shortage of effort from all sides, it seemed that we were unable to resolve the haze crisis effectively then.

5. The episodes of 1997 and 1998 have also awakened us to the reality and perils of transboundary haze pollution. Besides severe economic damage to the agriculture, health and tourism industries, I believe the nations concerned also suffered other losses too difficult to quantify. It is with this in mind that the Malaysian Government, through the Ministry of Science, Technology and the Environment, undertook the task of hosting this conference in Kuala Lumpur. We hope this conference will be useful in these respects:

Firstly, to provide a forum for the exchange of information and experiences on land and forest fire hazards that have affected various regions around the world;

Secondly, to Develop approaches and strategies to prevent, monitor and mitigate such hazards, including any resulting transboundary haze pollution; and

Thirdly, to Recommend ways and means for greater cooperation among countries,

international organisations, industries and communities, to meet future challenges of land and forest fire hazards.

6. I understand that this Conference has brought together many eminent personalities from around the globe. We are fortunate that they are ready, willing and able to share their knowledge and hands-on experience with us. The disastrous consequences of the previous haze episodes should be enough reason to now bring about concrete action from all those concerned; to break whatever bureaucratic inertia there exists; and to set in motion increased collaboration at the local, national, regional and international levels.

7. I have been briefed about the many positive steps that have been initiated in the ASEAN region, such as the ASEAN Ministerial Forum on Haze pollution, the Haze Technical Task Force, and the Sub-regional Fire Fighting Arrangement for Borneo and Sumatra. It is timely that these cooperative measures under the auspices of the ASEAN Secretariat be 'formalised' in the form of an ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution.

8. With the expected return of "El Nino" and the resulting drier than normal conditions from July till the end of the year, we should be ready and vigilant to meet any eventualities arising from the weather conditions. From past experience, if early action can be taken at the national level in respect of surveillance, monitoring, enforcement, preventive and mitigating measures, the impact of transboundary haze pollution can be much reduced or even avoided. It is therefore important that we strengthen national capabilities, utilising all resources and ensuring the proper management of land. In this regard, I would like to encourage scientists to carry out further research in the areas of land and forest fire management and to suggest options for land utilisation and conversion.

9. Ultimately, I hope this Conference will identify and assess the underlying causes of the problem and make recommendations for pragmatic and decisive action. Given the grave effects of haze pollution, I am sure that these recommendations will be met by the political will from the countries concerned to implement the necessary steps. Individually and collectively, we need to work hard to safeguard our existing environmental resources. It is only right that we do this, to ensure our progress and survival. We owe this much to our future generations.

10. On that note, it is my honour and privilege to officially open the "World Conference on Land and Forest Fire Hazards 2002".

Thank you.