

**SPEECH BY
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AT THE WELCOMING DINNER, ASEAN SENIOR OFFICIALS MEETING
ON DRUG MATTERS, AT KUALA LUMPUR
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I would like to bid a warm welcome to all delegates attending the 23rd Meeting of ASEAN Senior Officials on Drug Matters in Kuala Lumpur. I have been informed that you have had to work hard for your dinner, having been engaged in a long and energetic day of discussions. I hope your deliberations have been fruitful and will result in productive outcomes.

2. Throughout this meeting, you will be exchanging views and ideas on a problem that poses a significant threat to the well being, security and stability of our region. It is not hyperbole to suggest that the drug menace has the capacity to topple institutions and destroy nations. We have seen how the funds generated by the drug trade enables large cartels to destabilise governments.

3. It is an insidious vice that ruins lives and tears families apart, thereby weakening the very fabric of society. It dulls the mind and weakens the body. It is a significant drain on national productivity. According to a United Nations report, the highest levels of drug use are among those between 18 and 25 years of age. This statistic is tragic, given that this is the generation of the future. This is the generation upon whom we rely to continue economic development and strengthen nation building efforts.

4. Initiatives to rehabilitate and treat drug addicts, while necessary place a strain on national resources. Malaysia expects to spend over RM31 million for these purposes this year and I am sure many other countries will be allocating equally large sums.

5. The production and trafficking of illicit drugs, therefore, is a major concern that must be faced and addressed with commitment, courage and integrity.

6. No single country can fight the war on drugs by itself. Narcotics that are produced in one country can easily find its way into others. Borders and bureaucracy do not hamper or hinder the drug trade. It is a perverse irony that well before globalisation became a buzzword, the traffic in illicit drugs had been a true manifestation of the phenomenon.

7. It is therefore imperative that authorities reach out to one another across borders to form a unified front against this common enemy. In this regard, cooperation within ASEAN has been exemplary, via the border committees, joint enforcement action and exchange of intelligence that has long taken place.

8. It is a fact that enforcement activities have been intensified and have met with success. Raids on laboratories, drug seizures and eradication of drug crops have reduced the supply of drugs. Opium poppy cultivation in South East Asia has fallen by 35% in the last decade, while production has dropped by 21%. More than 11,000 hectares of opium poppy have been destroyed. The number of drug related arrests have gone up and numerous syndicates have been crippled. It is clear that the close working relationships forged between the authorities in this region have underscored

these efforts. On this score, I congratulate those officials who have tirelessly worked to achieve these successes.

9. However, we should not be lulled into a false sense of victory. Despite these considerable accomplishments, the drug trade still exists and continues to flourish. The global interception rate of illicit drugs is less than 30%. For every courier that is arrested, there are others ready and willing to take his place. For every processing plant that is destroyed, others operate undetected. More and more drugs are produced, new designer drugs are being invented, particularly in the Amphetamine - Type Stimulants group. The stark punitive measures that are in place act as a deterrent to some, but the lucrative nature of the businesses lures ever more people to produce, traffic and distribute.

10. Reduction of supply is just one half of the equation, because the narcotics industry exists to satisfy demand. Therefore, we must redouble our efforts to educate the public on the dangers of addiction. We must find and implement ways to get the message across more effectively, particularly to the younger members of our society. By nature they are more curious and therefore would be more easily seduced by the lure of drugs.

11. It is also important to tackle the root of problem by eradicating poverty and improving socio-economic conditions. For instance, in Malaysia, over 85% of drug users are from the lower income classes. Other studies have shown that drug addiction is more prevalent among the unemployed. Lifting people out of deprivation, increasing the standards of living and creating more job opportunities would eliminate the environment of desperation that is so fertile to addiction. It would encourage people on the margins to feel included in society. People with a good reason to live and be productive would not need to escape by disappearing into a narcotic haze.

12. It is the vision of the Malaysian Government to create a drug free generation by the year 2015. I am sure other nations share the spirit and sentiment behind this aspiration. To achieve this goal, we acknowledge that we require the assistance and cooperation of others. We will depend on strong ties and working relations with external parties, including fellow ASEAN member countries, UN agencies and countries from beyond the region.

13. The drug scourge is a cross border phenomenon, indiscriminate in choosing its victims, merciless in how it enslaves entire communities. Let us urgently translate our commitment and determination into action and results. Together, this is a battle that we can, and must win.

Thank you.