

**SPEECH BY  
YAB DATO' SERI ABDULLAH BIN HAJI AHMAD BADAWI  
AT THE OPENING OF THE 39TH ASEAN MINISTERIAL MEETING  
AT KUALA LUMPUR CONVENTION CENTRE  
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*"FORGING A UNITED, RESILIENT AND INTEGRATED ASEAN"*

Honourable Ministers and Delegates,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and gentlemen.

First and foremost, let me extend a very warm welcome to all present. I am very pleased indeed to have this opportunity of addressing all of you on this important occasion of the 39th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting. It certainly brings back pleasant memories of when I was Foreign Minister and took part in the annual A.M.M from 1991 to 1998.

Ladies and gentlemen,

2. It is important for us to remind ourselves that ASEAN is almost 40 years old today and capable of growing stronger. It is important to do this because we should never take for granted the fact that ASEAN has served the people of Southeast Asia well. It has kept the peace between its members, enabling regional cooperation to flourish and contribute to the economic and social wellbeing of the people. We need to recall this fact of history so that we constantly remind ourselves to nurture ASEAN and keep it central to the lives of the people in Southeast Asia for at least another 40 years, and more.

3. In a very pertinent way, the history of ASEAN had actually mirrored the history of global strategic developments. In 1967, when ASEAN was formed, Southeast Asia was deeply divided in theory and in practice because our countries were then caught in the middle of the Cold War. We sided with either of two antagonistic blocs which espoused two different ideologies. A turning point for ASEAN came in 1995 when Vietnam joined the Association. With the ending of the Cold War, ASEAN was able to exert its own identity as a truly indigenous regional grouping, independent and aligned to none. Our grouping became complete when Cambodia joined as a member of ASEAN in 1999.

4. Just as ASEAN's history mirrored global strategic developments, ASEAN's future will also be affected by the new wave of globalization. The new challenges confronting ASEAN countries are therefore not only economic, social and internal but also strategic and global in nature. These challenges emanate from beyond our

region and are therefore out of our immediate control. All of these will severely test ASEAN's unity and cohesion. But we must be steadfast in keeping our solidarity and remain focused on achieving our common mission of fostering greater and greater regional integration.

5. As sovereign countries committed to regionalism in Southeast Asia, we have demonstrated our determination to chart our own future when we adopted, in 2003, the ASEAN Concord II. That act was a solemn commitment to transform ourselves from an Association into a community of nations by a certain date in the future. We have since decided to start work on writing an ASEAN Charter. We have to move to become a true community because we cannot change our geography. We should never allow our countries to be divided again as they once were 40 years ago.

6. Thus, after nearly four decades of evolution, ASEAN is now engaged in a crucial stage of its development of transforming itself from being an Association since 1967 into an integrated and harmonious Community by the year 2020. We in Malaysia are preparing for that day. This year 2006, we launched our 9th National Development Plan for the next five years, as the first of a three-part National Mission of making Malaysia a fully developed nation by the year 2020. This is Malaysia's contribution to the strengthening of the regional economic order.

7. There is one additional reason why ASEAN countries must integrate more and integrate quickly. ASEAN has declared its wish to promote the growth of a larger community of East Asian countries, preferably anchored on the ASEAN plus Three process. East Asian economic integration can be the first line of defence against regional economic crises such as the one we had in 1997. It will also help to lock-in greater predictability and transparency with regard to the economic policies of regional countries. We must therefore strengthen further the ASEAN plus Three cooperation process which pertinently began in 1997. We should also continue to build upon our success of convening the East Asia Summit which we did at the end of last year, 2005.

8. While ASEAN's priority should necessarily be the fostering of regional peace, security and cooperation, we must also take part in addressing pressing international issues in order to stake our relevance. We must contribute to the fight against international terrorism. In fact, the scourge of terrorism has also become a menace to the security of our region and the stability of our respective countries. Peace and stability in Southeast Asia will determine whether ASEAN succeeds or fails as a regional organization. Peaceful conditions have always been the prerequisite for cooperation to endure and grow. While peace is indeed an end in itself, we cannot bring economic and social benefits to the people unless peace exists. Terrorism disturbs the international order and it can create disharmony among regional countries. Terrorism kills innocent lives and destroys valuable assets. We must demonstrate our determination to cooperate and eliminate, from our midst in Southeast Asia, the threat of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations.

9. In the same way, as responsible members of the international community, ASEAN countries should not appear indifferent to the plight of the Palestinians. The latest developments in the Middle East are gravely threatening international peace and security. I feel that that we in ASEAN must make our voices heard, loudly and clearly, that we cannot continue tolerating the subjugation and repression of the Palestinian people by Israel. This has been one of the most profound tragedies of our time. The situation has been made worse by the illegal construction of the separation wall by Israel in the occupied Palestinian Territories. This tragedy will not end unless there is an end to the occupation of Palestinian lands. There will be no lasting solution to the conflict until the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people are fulfilled for an independent and sovereign State of Palestine.

10. We should condemn Israel's latest use of disproportionate force in Gaza and in the West Bank. We should not tolerate Israel's excessive military reprisals against Lebanon. The collective punishment inflicted upon the Lebanese people and the destruction of towns and cities are unconscionable. The military incursions into Lebanese territory are blatant disregard for Lebanon's sovereignty. The United Nations Security Council should take action to call for an immediate ceasefire, deploy a United Nations Peace-Keeping Force to implement the ceasefire and prevent an invasion of Lebanon by Israel.

11. The Middle East peace process is now in tatters. The international community must unite to bring about a resumption of peaceful negotiations. The core issue remains the sixty years of suffering and humiliation of the Palestinian people. This is a fact which speaks poorly of the efficacy of international diplomacy. But the international community cannot continue to evade its responsibility of finding a comprehensive, just and durable solution which should include bringing into being an independent state of Palestine, living side by side with Israel in peace, within secure and recognized borders.

12. In our own region in Southeast Asia, the maintenance of peace and security must remain, always, our top priority. In the wake of troubles elsewhere in the world, the value of tranquility and stability which we have in our own neighborhood should be self evident. Community building is one of the best ways of building peace and keeping the peace. Therefore, building the ASEAN community, block by block, should be a constant item in the annual ASEAN agenda of deliberations and programme of action.

13. I hold the view that community building in ASEAN should adopt the approach of proceeding step-by-step, instrument-by-instrument, institution-by-institution. This is the only way to ensure that we achieve true consensus on establishing a set of common values, perceptions and outlook.

14. ASEAN the Association is said to be sui generis, that is to say, altogether unique. ASEAN the Community will equally be sui generis. The integration process will not require member states to forfeit their sovereign rights and competencies. They will remain free to pursue their core national or bilateral interests. In fact, I envisage that the ASEAN Community will create an environment which enables the

individuality of the member states to flourish while they share, at the same time, certain common principles, practices and values.

15. We have, of course, already decided that the ASEAN Community shall be built upon the three pillars of the ASEAN Security Community, the ASEAN Economic Community and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. In this effort, it is my belief nevertheless that certain overarching principles must always prevail in all the three cases.

16. First, there should be universal acceptance that community interests would prevail over national interests on issues affecting the community. We must find a formula where the larger community interest should never become subordinate to the veto of only one or a few members.

17. Second, there should be put in place capacities for enforcing community decisions. Our record of incorporating ASEAN decisions into our respective national legislations are very poor indeed. We have done better in giving national effect to wider international treaties and conventions. We should be able to do the same for ASEAN treaties and agreements.

18. Third, there must be adherence, by community members, to a common set of community values. Some of these values may be universal in nature but others could be distinctly ASEAN in character. Topping the list of values must be the acceptance of good governance in our respective countries and societies.

19. In our region, the situation in Myanmar is impacting upon the image and credibility of ASEAN. We would very much like to have Myanmar move forward with the rest of ASEAN. Therefore, we also hope that the Government of Myanmar will take the necessary steps to enable Myanmar to so move forward with the rest of ASEAN. This is an important part of the task of community building in this region.

20. We should look forward to receiving the report of the Eminent Persons Group and acting upon their recommendations on the establishment of an ASEAN Charter. That will indeed be a major leap forward in our work of placing the building blocks for the ASEAN Community. I hope we can celebrate the real 40th anniversary of ASEAN, next year, with that feather in our cap.

21. As Malaysia completes its Chairmanship of the ASEAN Standing Committee in a few days, I feel satisfied that we have done our part in the past one year steering ASEAN in the right direction. We look forward to doing further work, in particular regarding the ASEAN Economic Community, when Malaysia assumes the Chair of the 38th ASEAN Economic Ministers Meeting next month. I do hope that the next A.M.M will see further concrete progress in our common endeavor of forging a united, resilient and integrated ASEAN. I wish all the Foreign Ministers and delegates success in their deliberations over the next few days. And it is now with great pleasure, that I declare open the 39th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting.

I thank you.