

**SPEECH BY
DATO' SERI ABDULLAH BIN HAJI AHMAD BADAWI
AT THE ASIA MEDIA SUMMIT 2006 AT HOTEL NIKKO, KUALA LUMPUR
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Excellencies

Distinguished guests

Media professionals, Ladies and gentlemen

Assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh and good afternoon.

1. It is truly a pleasure for me to see so many distinguished media professionals and thinkers assembled in Kuala Lumpur. I am pleased that you are meeting to discuss ways and means of creating better understanding among media leaders that could eventually lead to better understanding among nations at large. It is indeed a noble objective, but, as you will acknowledge, an objective which requires commitment, sincerity and resolve to achieve.

2. To those of you who have come from afar, I bid you a very warm welcome. I do hope that your stay in Malaysia will be both pleasant and rewarding. You come to Malaysia at an interesting time, as we commence the second half of our journey to become a developed nation by the year 2020.

3. Toward this end, we released the 9th Malaysia Plan last month, which defined policies and programmes to enhance the country's capacity to compete globally, enhance national integration and effect a broader-based and more equitable distribution of wealth. The Malaysia Plan has five key thrusts or strategies:

- The first thrust is to move the economy up the value chain.
- The second thrust is to raise the country's capacity for knowledge, creativity and innovation and nurture 'first class mentality'.
- The third thrust is to address persistent socio-economic inequalities constructively and productively.
- The fourth thrust is to improve the standard and sustainability of our quality of life.
- The fifth and final thrust is to strengthen the institutional and implementation capacity of the country.

4. Our overriding objective is national unity. This is the foundation that ensures prosperity and harmony for the people of Malaysia, a society confident and competent to participate in the pursuit for global peace. Malaysia feels that it is well placed to begin the journey of renewal because it is a multi-racial and multi-religious country in which we treat our diversity as an asset to be nurtured. Yes, we do have our faults and foibles; but our model stands unchallenged as the most successful

multi-ethnic, multi-religious society. We are proud of our achievements. For those who have come from abroad, I invite you to take an opportunity to look around and witness for yourself the Malaysia that we have built.

5. The participation of more than 60 countries at this Asia Media Summit reflects a diversity of peoples and cultures that aspire for global peace. Your interest to also discuss, debate and initiate dialogue on international, regional and national realities will have a great impact on the mass media today. The upcoming Inter-Continental Media Dialogue in KL and Europe-Asia Media Dialogue in Paris are proof of this aspiration.

Ladies and Gentlemen

6. What are some of the challenges that may need the media's attention? Before I proceed to lay down my thoughts, allow me to say that I do not intend my observations to be a criticism or attack on the media. Far from it. I do believe that the media is an institution that has its own purpose and requires the space to operate freely.

7. Certainly, the media wields tremendous influence over the society in which it operates. It acts as a conduit of information and as a voice of popular opinion. It shapes opinions and influences thoughts. It seeks to keep other institutions of society honest. Yet, if we are completely frank, we must also accept that the media is not wholly driven by noble ideals alone. Profits matter, and circulation numbers and viewership ratings matter. And in pursuing these other goals, biases, agendas, satisfying the gallery all become part of the daily editorial preoccupation.

8. I do not want to go into the merits and demerits of the pursuit of these other goals. But what I would like to say is that when noble ideals are mixed with other motivations, then those ideals can become skewed. And skewed ideals may result in injustices. Unfortunately, as I have observed, any adverse scrutiny of the media is quick to be jumped upon as an abrogation of the media's right to be free. What I ask of you today is that while you have the freedom to make your observations and judgments of me, I, too, hand on heart and in all sincerity, seek that same liberty to be honest with my views.

9. As we all know, the media is a pervasive and persuasive medium. It has the power to change people's minds and attitudes. In my view, that power entails a huge responsibility to inform and educate people. To do so, it must present different sides to a story, dismiss half truths and unfounded allegations and foster critical thinking so that people become more informed on issues that affect their daily lives. However, the temptations offered by vested interests – be they commercial, political or religious – can and do lead to misinformation, miscommunication, confusion and even violence. Too often, the inclination to sensationalise or cause alarm is too great to resist. Too often, localized unrest is passed off as a national uproar. Decades of progress and development can go up in smoke if the media is not responsible or accountable.

10. Sensitivity to cultural, religious and societal nuances is neither a prerogative nor responsibility of people in power alone. Journalists and media professionals in general need to reflect on the possible after-effects of their actions on society, both at home and internationally. One simple report or a photograph or a cartoon can turn a peaceful society into a violent one. What goes out of a printing press or is beamed out from a broadcast station cannot be taken back. Regrets or corrections can never entirely undo the harm that is done.

11. Some people argue that the media should only be concerned with the truth and not the consequences of reporting it. But then consider the use of exit polls before the elections. Time and again, country after country, we see that quite often the predictions and the actual results of elections vary considerably. Yet the practice is continued. Unlike the weather forecasts, any prediction on a social outcome is an input into the society that would alter the course of action by the members of that society. Media people are not passive observers. They are active members of society and they could also be motivated by the good of the people they serve.

12. The diversity of people that media serves – ethnic, religious, political, cultural – have to be kept in mind by media professionals, lest the good intentions result in undesirable ends. There is already a preponderance of violence in the world and merely reporting it is not enough. As responsible world citizens, media people need to look at the root causes of conflict, and its many dimensions, and perhaps offer solutions.

13. Conflict should be solved by civilized dialogue and not by violence. Violence only breeds more violence. In the dialogue of civilizations, the media plays a crucial role by giving voice to the voiceless. It performs an invaluable service by analyzing incidents in addition to reporting them. And in order to do this, the opportunity should be given to all communities – the developed world and the developing world, the north and the south – to present their views.

14. Sadly, it seems to me that in many cases, the media is selective in its reporting of the world. Of course, it is unrealistic to expect complete and comprehensive coverage all the time. Media is a business and content will accordingly be dictated by what sells. Editors will choose stories that fit into their worldview, or stories that appeal to their particular market segment. In the most extreme cases, editorial policy will be guided by sensationalism and prurient interest, given they think that it is what the public wants. Even in cases where the media attempts to be inclusive, they are constrained by time and space. Those who are media literate may understand the bigger picture, but for the common man, what they see and read is reality. Stories that are carried by media become the sole and unequivocal truth for them, particularly in the age of around-the-clock, wall-to-wall coverage.

15. The world can be a bewildering and frightening place. We grapple with issues such as global warming, rising oil prices, the spread of disease and regional conflict. These realities scare many of us and push us to question what future awaits our

future generations. We come to a conclusion that there is so much uncertainty and ambiguity in the world we live in. Often, this leads us to be intolerant of divergent views, cultures and religions, precipitating conflicts between nations and causing misery to peoples. I believe it is high time we accept the uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding us and exploit approaches and solutions to the global problems with concepts such as flexibility, openness and objectivity.

16. Continuing dialogue between two great civilizations - the Islamic World and the Christian West is not only important in determining the relationship between Islam and the West but is also vital in shaping the future of humankind. It is the responsibility of media of goodwill to work hard to change the negative perceptions on both sides of the divide. Undoubtedly, the task is not going to be easy, for these perceptions have deep roots.

17. Quite clearly, we will not be able to change the situation by mere dialogue. We must be brave enough, and we must be honest enough, to admit that as long as there is hegemony, as long as one side attempts to control and dominate the other, the animosity and antagonism between the two civilizations will continue. This is why hegemony must end. Mutual respect for one another should replace hegemony. Reciprocity should become the ethical principle that conditions relations between the West and Islam.

18. Certain voices, both in the West and in the Muslim world, are not given the prominence they deserve, especially those who preach moderation and understanding. The mainstream media could give much more attention to them. It is only too apparent that these two groups - one in the West and the other in the Muslim world - share a common perspective on some of the critical challenges facing both civilizations and the world at large. Both are opposed to hegemony. Both reject violence and terror. Both desire for a just and peaceful world. Both are united by a common bond. It is this common bond that makes them bridge-builders. The media itself should also play the role of bridge builders.

19. If I had a wish, it would be for the voices of moderation to be given more prominent coverage. Too often, headlines are hogged by the language of hatred and aggression – the language of threat and confrontation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

20. Let us start now by curbing the extremists in our midst. We must put a stop to the mockery of any particular religion or school of thought. We must stop the sacrilege of any symbol held sacred by the faithful.

21. On that note, let me conclude by congratulating AIBD and its partners for organizing this very important Asia Media Summit and for bringing together to Malaysia a prominent group of people who are serious about changing their media to

people's network, people's meeting place and an instrument for dialogue between civilizations. I am glad that this Conference is being held as an annual event because your objectives, while necessary are ambitious. They cannot be achieved with one single forum. I sincerely hope, for the long-term benefit of us all, that you have the inspiration and the perseverance to succeed.

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish you very fruitful discussions in the coming days.