

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY
YAB DATO' SERI ABDULLAH BIN HAJI AHMAD BADAWI
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AT HOTEL NIKKO, KUALA LUMPUR
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His Royal Highness,
Raja Dr Nazrin Shah ibni Sultan Azlan Muhibbuddin Shah,
Crown Prince of Perak,

Professor Dr. Carolina Hernandez,
Head, ASEAN ISIS,

Dato' Seri Jawhar Hassan,
Conference Chairman,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. Nature is profoundly beautiful and immensely bountiful. Nature sustains life in all its wondrous variety. Yet, Nature can also be wrathful. Oftentimes, Nature kills and destroys in ways even more devastating than the evils that Man perpetrate sometimes.

2. From time to time, we are reminded of the power of nature. The tsunami four years ago took 230,000 lives. Today, the cyclone in the Irrawaddy Delta and the earthquake in Sichuan province have caused 200,000 deaths. Millions more people are displaced and homeless. The number keeps rising. The magnitude of human suffering is numbing.

3. This region has experienced many such disasters before. It is bound to witness many more in the future. It is the fate of the Asia Pacific region, it seems, to be prone to violent storms aggravated by climate change. We are situated in the Ring of Fire. And our land-mass has yet to settle.

4. We have no choice but to recognize that human security should be among our greatest concerns. The socio-economic scene accentuates the grave importance of this aspect of security. Escalating food, fuel and commodity prices are placing enormous burdens especially upon the poor. Inflation rates are among the highest in many countries. Real incomes are falling. The middle class has joined the ranks of those complaining.

5. Rice, the staple food for Asians, rose 76 percent in the five months from December last year to April this year. Overall, food prices rose 83 percent in the last three years. Oil prices quadrupled during the last six. They have increased 40 percent in the first five months of 2008. National budgets are straining under the weight of the mounting cost of subsidies. The analysts say prices have probably peaked. At some point they no doubt must. But in the meantime they remain very high.

6. The problem is largely externally induced, often beyond the control of individual countries. But the situation is fuelling dissatisfaction against governments everywhere. It breeds discontent on other issues. Protests, demonstrations and food

riots have broken out in many countries in the developing world, including in our region. However, there does not seem to exist the same degree of concern in the developed world except for the rising fuel prices.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

7. There is an urgent need to enhance our focus on human security especially regarding those aspects which are most pressing. We need to put in place more efficient mobilisation, coordination and delivery of international assistance. International agencies and national governments must establish effective mechanism to achieve this purpose. National preparedness and contingency planning must be improved. Those countries which have limited resources and poor infrastructure must be assisted with capacity building programmes.

8. The latest disasters in Myanmar and China have taught us many lessons concerning relief and rehabilitation. The case of Myanmar has forced ASEAN to respond as a regional body, and take a lead role in facilitating interaction between Myanmar and the international community. ASEAN has had better success than others in persuading Myanmar to be more receptive to international assistance. ASEAN member countries have become prominent donors themselves. Most importantly, ASEAN has brought to the fore the principle of neutrality and impartiality when the issue at hand is humanitarian assistance. Progress would not have been possible if international assistance was conditioned by political considerations.

9. ASEAN however can do more in the area of humanitarian assistance. As I said at the Nikkei Conference in Tokyo last month, it should not delay establishing the Humanitarian Relief Centre that it agreed upon in 2004. It must also implement the Agreement on Disaster Management and Disaster Response that its members signed in 2005.

10. But the steep rise in food, oil and commodity prices requires a global response. National and regional efforts are naturally limited. The international community must be prepared to consider bold and unprecedented measures. The burden which is now borne largely by the developing countries and the poor can easily spill over into the developed societies. Already, fishermen have blocked ports in Spain and France; truck drivers have angrily parked their vehicles along roads in Britain.

11. Some countries such as Japan have taken the lead in instituting certain bold measures. To prevent speculative biddings, Japan has suspended trading of rice in the futures market. It has also offered to sell rice from its stockpile at reduced prices. We should examine such steps for possible application to the oil market, itself an important contributor to the soaring prices of other commodities. All such measures would, of course, require negotiation and agreement at the international level.

12. The ASEAN Plus Three process can also do its part. The ASEAN Food Security Reserve does not have adequate stocks to effectively stabilise the price and supply of rice among the members. The Reserve needs to be built up so that it can function effectively as envisaged in the 1979 Agreement. Steps also need to be taken to move the East Asia Emergency Rice Reserve beyond the pilot project stage. It must become a viable rice reserve scheme that has the full commitment of all participating countries.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

13. While the problem of human security may have come to the fore lately, another major security issue, that is the problem of managing major power relations in the region have been with us in the Asia Pacific for quite some time. Nevertheless, I sense an improved regional atmosphere although the actual situation on the ground has remained unchanged. I have seen certain positive changes in the policies for addressing the situation on the ground.

14. Some countries have increased their military expenditures but these have not caused any significant change in the military balance. Others might prefer to say that the military imbalance remains unchanged. For example, the perceived nuclear threat from North Korea still persists. Sensitive historical issues and territorial disputes between China and Japan have not been resolved. Six decades on, the problem concerning the status of Chinese Taipei is still with us. The United States and some other countries continue to view China as a potential threat. And there is no progress in the efforts to find solutions to the overlapping claims in the South China Sea.

15. All the long-standing issues therefore remain. Yet we see a perceptible improvement in the relations between the countries concerned. This is the result, I believe, of the adoption of more constructive policies for managing the on-going problems.

16. In Tokyo, policy changes towards China have brought about greater warmth in their relations. President Hu Jintao's visit to Japan last month was the first by a Chinese leader in ten years. His meeting with Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda had called for a new era in the relations. It is to be marked by annual summits, greater efforts to resolve disputes over the exploitation of natural gas fields in the East China Sea and their determination not to allow history to divide them. Let us wish that the two powers maintain the momentum they have created for themselves.

17. It should also be welcome news that the recently elected President of Chinese Taipei, Ma Ying-jeou, has committed himself to better relations with China. He said he will "not rock the boat in the region" even as he holds fast to Taipei's position on cross-Straits relations. That is certainly reassuring.

18. In the United States, the same Administration modified its approach and adopted a more flexible and open stance in the negotiations with North Korea within the framework of the Six-Party Talks. There has been a marked improvement in both the atmospherics and substance for fruitful negotiations. Washington has just offered 500,000 tons of much-needed food aid to North Korea.

19. Natural disasters are definitely not welcome but they seem to have the positive effect of bringing countries and peoples closer to each other in our region. Japan and Chinese Taipei are two of the leading parties involved in providing relief and rescue assistance to the people of Sichuan province in China. And in Myanmar, despite some difficulties, countries that are strongly critical of the political situation there have nevertheless established a working relationship with the regime to extend assistance in disaster-struck areas. Problems remain. But we do hope that all these will be overcome considering that the welfare of the people is paramount. After all, the purpose of government is to serve the people, to protect them and make their lives better for them. The people must be saved from their immediate agonies.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

20. The point I am making from the foregoing is that, we can and we should bring about dramatic improvements in the security environment in the Asia Pacific region by adopting the right approaches. We have learned from the past that intimidation and coercion rarely work except when the adversary is weak. Talking threats serve no purpose except to create unnecessary fears and enrich arms manufacturers even more. Belligerent rhetoric begets angry retorts and together they breed greater hostility.

21. We can travel further along the road to peace and stability if there is a desire to negotiate rather than intimidate, to confer rather than confront, and to accommodate rather than aggravate.

22. We can also progress farther on the path of stability if we continually reinforce the frameworks for cooperation in the region. I have not made a detailed survey. I could be wrong. But I believe the Asia Pacific is probably the region which has the largest number of regional cooperation mechanisms. For instance, we have the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation or APEC, the ASEAN Regional Forum or ARF, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN and, we sometime forget, the Pacific Islands Forum or PIF. We also have the ASEAN Plus Three process and the East Asia Summit.

23. Let me dwell a little more on one current initiative to strengthen regional cooperation in Southeast Asia. This is the ASEAN Charter. I am happy to note from the programme of this conference that a session is devoted to it. I am aware that some in the region have strong reservations about the Charter. They include some in my own country. I am aware that ASEAN-ISIS, whose guest I am here today, also wanted more from the Charter.

24. I respect their views. Please permit me to give mine.

25. Malaysia has ratified the Charter. Five other members have also done so. I look forward to all other members ratifying the Charter according to their due national processes, so that it can come into force.

26. Let me say that the Charter does not incorporate all that Malaysia wanted. I doubt if any country got all it wanted. There are probably also countries that had to settle for things they did not really want. We all had to compromise. The ASEAN Charter is the outcome of consensus. It would not have seen the light of day otherwise. Along with consensus comes the responsibility to honour the provisions of the Charter.

27. The Charter is not just about human rights and democracy. It is also not just about economic development, or only about security cooperation. It is about all three, and much more. I appeal to all that we look at the Charter in its totality. We should not reject the Charter because we are unhappy with a few provisions or omissions. The Malay people have a saying: Marahkan nyamuk, bakar kelambu. It means, because you are angry at a single mosquito, you burn the whole mosquito net. We should avoid taking such actions.

28. The Charter will bring many welcome improvements to ASEAN which will be much more institutionalised as a result. For instance, leaders will meet twice a year instead of once. The Secretary General will have four deputies instead of two. Each ASEAN country will have a permanent representative to ASEAN to ensure that ASEAN work is accorded due attention. Collaborative forums have been streamlined and dedicated to different key areas. Decision-making, oversight and compliance will be substantially enhanced.

29. The Charter does not provide for specific sanctions for Charter breaches or non-compliance. But this does not mean that there will be none. The Summit will decide as and when the need arises. This is a pragmatic approach.

30. We do hope that the adoption of the Charter will equip and enable ASEAN to contribute more effectively towards the building of an ASEAN Community of peace, prosperity and human development. Everything, however, will depend on implementation. Regional and international institutions do not have a good record of implementation. ASEAN must break this mould. Certainly it must do much better to satisfy the people of ASEAN. It will not be spared if it does not.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

31. Over and above what we can do institutionally to strengthen regional cooperation, we can further guarantee peace if we commit ourselves to settle all disputes by peaceful means. The best peaceful solutions are those derived from friendly negotiations. In those cases where solutions cannot be found through negotiations, countries should agree to third party mediation, arbitration or adjudication. I am reminded of this as Malaysia had just settled a territorial dispute with Singapore, this year, through adjudication by the International Court of Justice in the Hague. In fact, this is the second experience for Malaysia. The first was a territorial dispute we had with Indonesia which was also peacefully settled in the World Court in 2002.

32. By bringing our disputes to be peacefully settled in the World Court, we believe we in fact are abiding by the best principles of ASEAN and international law. We do commend this approach for the good of bilateral relations and wider cooperation in the region.

33. On that note, let me conclude my address this morning. May I wish ASEAN-ISIS and the distinguished participants gathered here all success in your discussions.

Thank you.