

**SPEECH BY
YAB DATO' SERI ABDULLAH BIN HAJI AHMAD BADAWI
AT THE ASEM CULTURE MINISTERS MEETING
AT KUALA LUMPUR
22 APRIL 2008**

Excellencies,

Distinguished Delegates,

Members of the Diplomatic Corp,

Ladies and Gentlemen.

It gives me great pleasure to say "SELAMAT DATANG" and welcome you to Malaysia for the Third A.S.E.M Culture Ministers Meeting. As a co-sponsoring country of the Asia-Europe Meeting process, Malaysia feels very honoured to be given the opportunity to host this important event.

2. I would like to thank each of the A.S.E.M member Governments and organizations represented here for their positive response to Malaysia's invitation to come to Kuala Lumpur for this meeting. I would like to make special mention of the representatives of our new members from Asia and Europe. Your presence demonstrates the continuing commitment of A.S.E.M countries to address issues pertaining to culture, the arts and heritage. I hope your deliberations this time will achieve concrete results to match the theme of this meeting, which is "CULTURAL DIVERSITY: REALIZING THE ACTION PLAN". Our underlying objective is to find ways of making culture an effective contributor to the enhancement of international ties and friendship. Specifically, I hope this meeting will be able to give focus to forging cross-cultural understanding and accepting diversity as an asset in the relations between Asia and Europe.

3. Since its inception in 1996, the Asia-Europe Meeting has become a unique inter-regional forum that practises open, evolutionary and informal engagements. As a process of dialogue and cooperation which is leaders-driven, A.S.E.M has proven its worth and usefulness, It has served the dual purpose of promoting respect for cultural diversity while pursuing, at the same time, the target of inter-regional cooperation and community building in the wider sense.

4. The A.S.E.M has indeed achieved considerable success in expanding political interaction between the countries of Asia and Europe. It has also made progress, although to a lesser extent, in developing economic partnerships. Be that as it may, this A.S.E.M Culture Ministers Meeting has its own special function. It should serve as a forum to intensify dialogue and develop closer interactions between peoples of various cultures. It should generate a greater awareness of cross-dimensional issues that affect both regions. This Meeting can showcase the efforts of both regions to develop complementary or common responses to the profound changes taking place in our common international environment, including increased global interdependence.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

5. Dialogues and cooperation between cultures and civilizations should aim to tackle simultaneously two interrelated problems. While identifying the best approaches for promoting mutual understanding and tolerance, we must at the same time achieve success in removing ignorance and prejudice. While taking pride in protecting our own heritage and cultures, we can and should be willing to respect the heritage and cultures of others. We should promote diversity as part and parcel of our daily lives and as part and parcel of our existence as an international community of nations. All nations should adhere to the provisions of the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

6. One of the most difficult bridges to build across the cultural divide is to have people appreciate the value systems of others, be it in terms of religious beliefs or forms of worship. This bridge we must consciously build and continuously strengthen.

7. In fact, the evidence will prove that with a better understanding of cultural diversities, Governments would be better able to foster closer relations and partnerships for the social and economic benefits of the people. It has been proven that the more societies learn about other cultures, they too become more tolerant and accepting of others. Therefore it is the task of forums such as this Meeting to make deliberate and conscious efforts, and take concrete steps, to provide programmes and opportunities for cross-cultural exposures between peoples and societies.

8. Therefore, in order to ensure that the advancement of the A.S.E.M process continues unabated, Delegates to this Meeting must take the lead in their respective countries to engender a higher degree of understanding and trust among ourselves. We need to proliferate dialogue and cooperation between the peoples of Asia and Europe at many levels and in various fields. The list would be quite endless but we might wish to give priority to the sectors of social development, labour and employment, education and training, public health, and the environment. Cultural exchange programmes should include all layers of the society but, personally, I would always like to give emphasis to the youth among us. Young people possess idealism and enthusiasm. Most often, they are very creative as well. But more importantly, they are the leaders of tomorrow in our respective societies. We must engage them now, not later.

9. We need to promote industries which cater for and allow the creative arts and skills to blossom, in short creative industries. Such industries will also facilitate the protection of intellectual property and traditions. Cultural creativity will create new jobs. They will help to develop and sustain a mature society. The growing weight of the creative economy must be given due recognition. I hope this Meeting of Culture Ministers will give the matter its due attention.

10. Malaysia will do its part to realize the objectives that I have outlined. Our hosting of this Third A.S.E.M Culture Ministers Meeting is testimony of our commitment to the success of the A.S.E.M process. Malaysia will also continue to explore new initiatives and mechanisms to instil the sense of partnership among the peoples of our two regions. As a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, Malaysia would certainly lead by example in making our cultural diversity a valued national asset. For example, we have a "National Service" programme whose primary purpose is to

instil among our young citizens the sense of belonging as one people although we may come from different ethnic groups or profess different religions. Therefore, we do feel that we have the sincerity and the credibility to say that we hope this Meeting will be able to do its part to strengthen the cultural relationship between the people of Asia and Europe.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

11. I am confident that this Meeting will provide the opportunity for Delegates to share experiences on best practices, identify opportunities in facing the challenges of globalization, and explore the possibility of stepping up cultural exchanges and cooperation between Asia and Europe. I hope you will succeed in launching specific projects and programmes towards this end. I have been informed that there are more than 30 member countries represented in this meeting. Let me once again wish a warm welcome to all the participants from abroad. I hope you will have a pleasant stay and feel at home in our country. And I hope your discussions will be productive and successful.

12. On that note, it is now my pleasure and privilege to officially declare open, the Third A.S.E.M Culture Ministers Meeting.

Thank you.