

SPEECH BY THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER
AT THE OPENING OF THE UNITED NATIONS
SEMINAR ON FAMILY & CHILD WELFARE AT
THE DEWAN TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN ON
OCTOBER 17, 1960

Mr Chairman, Your Excellencies, Honourable Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to say at once that the Government of the Federation of Malaya is both honoured and happy to be the host of this First Regional Seminar in Asia on Family and Child Welfare under the auspices of the United Nations.

The significance of this Seminar and its fundamental importance to the future of Asia are clearly indicated by the magnificent response to the invitation to attend this conference of experts in Kuala Lumpur.

Assembling in this historic hall for the opening ceremony today, you are the delegates from no less than seventeen independent nations of Asia and five territories, twenty-two in all, in other words the whole of free Asia, together with delegates from nine international non-government organisations and six agencies of the United Nations, all of whom have in one way or another a special or particular interest in the future well-being of families and children.

I have no hesitation in saying that this Seminar is one of the most representative conferences ever held anywhere in Asia, and I trust that this very fact, this physical expression of your common interest, will be an added inspiration for the discussions you will hold during the next two weeks.

The Federation of Malaya welcomes all of you to our country and to our capital, and I can, assure you that we have done everything humanly possible to make certain that your conference will be a great success.

Our Social Welfare Department and many organisations and individuals in Malaya have all been working hard for this purpose over many weeks past. As with all the delegates attending here they have tackled the problems of organising and planning this

conference with almost the same spirit of dedication one expects from a good mother in a devoted family.

On behalf of the Government I wish to thank each and all of them, and each and all of you, for your efforts and enthusiasm.

This Seminar is designed in such a way that it will enable the most comprehensive discussion to be given to every vital aspect of family and child welfare services and the contributions these can make to raising the standards of living of communities in Asia.

I am sure you will agree with me that this conference can be a splendid opportunity for the exchange of workable ideas, both new and old, which have sprung from Asian minds and hearts, both in practice and theory, over many years.

In addition, this conference should prove of practical merit because it will also have the chance to draw on ideas and experience evolved in other parts of the world outside Asia. The delegates from international bodies and the United Nations will undoubtedly increase the fund of common knowledge to our mutual benefit.

In the Federation of Malaya (as I do not doubt our delegates will be only too pleased to tell you) we take a tremendous interest in social welfare, and particularly in families and children. We have our own problems, as any country does.

In fact, I should say that in Asia, with its hundreds of millions of people and its multiplicity of ways of life, language, customs and traditions, the problems of family and child welfare may even seem bewildering in their variety to observers from outside Asia. In Malaya this is particularly true, because we are an amalgam of three major races of the East, as well as minor elements of other races from Asia or elsewhere.

In independent Malaya we are doing everything we possibly can to ensure the health, education and well-being of families and children, and we can justly say that in a spirit of steady progress we are developing a wider knowledge and appreciation at all levels in economic life.

I would like to give you a concrete instance. I suppose there is no aspect of family and child welfare, particularly in Asia, which causes more concern than the infant mortality rate. In 1950 the infant mortality rate in Malaya for each thousand live births was

102. This has progressively diminished over the past ten years due to the wider application of new ideas in the care of children before and after birth, and inspite of a rapid increase in population, to reach the figure last year, 1959, of 66 for each thousand live births.

It would be easy to say that this progress gives cause for satisfaction, but we in Malaya will never be satisfied until we can reduce this figure to one comparable with those among the lowest in the world. I am sure that this is also the ambition of all countries represented here.

Malaya is in a sense a little image of large Asia. By this I mean that although there are crowded cities and towns, there are scattered throughout a community which is predominantly rural. With the possible exception of Japan, Asia is still a rural continent, and the vast distance of Asia, together with her gigantic and increasing population (almost two-thirds of the world's people live in Asia) add immensely to the problems you will have under discussion. But the fundamental fact is that most Asians live rural lives.

We in Malaya are giving top priority in Government policy to every possible aspect of rural development, because we believe that men, women and children who live in country areas should have the same opportunities and amenities and standards available to those in the urban areas.

Expressing this policy and belief in the terms of your Seminar, this means that we in Malaya want to achieve the widest possible facilities which will ensure the greatest possible reduction in problems of family and child welfare in the rural areas. Naturally it means more and more midwives, clinics and schools at all levels, but it also means more experts trained to deal with social, family and juvenile problems. It is an ambitious programme, but we intend to do our level best to achieve our objective.

Therefore, it is my hope that in this Seminar you will give particular importance to the rural aspect of any problem you discuss. I am sure that all experts and delegates present here will appreciate the significance of this emphasis of mine for the general well-being of Asia.

I would like to say that the Government in Malaya and voluntary services here will welcome any ideas and practical schemes which may help us in the advancement and progress of

family and child welfare in rural Malaya, ideas and schemes which we can also readily adapt for use in urban areas.

Knowing the devotion and interest which brings you all together here, I am certain that your deliberations will be most fruitful and the inter-change of ideas and experience most valuable to all of you and to your own countries.

On behalf of the Government and people of Malaya, let me say you are most welcome, and I hope that those of you who have not visited our new nation before, as well as those who have, will enjoy your stay. I hope too, you will consider, when you return home, that your share in this conference has been most well worthwhile.

I now have great pleasure indeed in declaring open the United Nations Seminar on Family and Child Welfare.