

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER AT THE
OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE SIXTH MINISTERIAL
CONFERENCE FOR THE ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT OF SOUTHEAST ASIA, AT
DEWAN TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN, KUALA
LUMPUR ON 3RD MAY, 1971

Mr Chairman, Distinguished Guests, Hon'ble Ministers, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is an honour and pleasure for me to welcome, on behalf of the Government and people of Malaysia, the distinguished delegates who have come from so many friendly countries in Asia to Kuala Lumpur, to attend this Ministerial Conference for Economic Development.

We are happy and honoured that you have decided to meet here in our Capital City, and sincerely hope that not only will your deliberations in this Conference Hall be constructive and fruitful, but that outside the Conference also, you will enjoy every single moment of your stay in Malaysia.

Mr Chairman, I recall with particular pleasure attending the First Inaugural Ministerial Conference for the Economic Development of South East Asia which was held in Tokyo in 1966, and it is indeed an honour for me to be asked to open to-day this, the Sixth in the series of this Annual Conference.

Year by year I have followed with keen interest the activities of various projects that are currently being implemented with the pooled good-will, human and material resources of all participating countries.

Ever since I have been a Minister in the Malaysian Cabinet, my first and foremost love as a subject and as a duty, has been the subject of Development—both National and Regional.

From my experience over the years, I would say of the three fold process of Development, Planning, Implementation and Evaluation—Implementation is perhaps the most difficult of the

three, and it requires a clear definition of action if development plans are in fact to be translated from plans into projects producing tangible results both on the ground and in raising the standard of living of all our peoples.

I am glad to see that first and foremost in your Agenda is the overall evaluation of the progress and results that these Annual get-together of developers in this region has achieved because without the achievement of physical projects in practice, the hard work put into such Conferences will remain still-born and buried in nicely printed reports.

So, therefore, I hope, during this Conference, that you will achieve success in reviewing the past, assessing the present and charting the future with a firm resolution to convert the many existing plans for regional co-operation into actual and factual realities.

It may be said that today in the opening of this Conference, we are celebrating its Sixth birthday.

I personally do not now like my own birthday, because waking up in the morning with the thought that I am in fact one year older is somewhat depressing!

But, in the case of the birthday of this Conference today, it is the exact opposite of a personal human birthday; it is a day of gratitude and greater hope in that we have co-operated together for the last five years, and sit here now looking forward more forcibly and more determined to strengthen our ties with one another for even greater co-operation and co-ordination in the mutual and more effective development of our Region of Southeast Asia.

Mr Chairman, we are living in fast and changing times, and the legacies of the past are rapidly giving way to new perspective, of the future.

Our region of South-East Asia has undergone some dramatic experiences over the last decade; some of these have been most tragic with both development and progress being frustrated and muted by the sound of gun-fire and the sorrow of human sufferings caused by the havoc of war and strife.

Areas within our region which should have been cultivated and developed, and the energies which should have been put into that development have had to be diverted and wasted to wielding the weapons and machines of war instead of the implements and machines of peace and of progress.

Unfortunately, over the last decade or so, war and insurgencies have pre-dominantly dominated the scene of Southeast Asia to the detriment of development and progress.

The most dramatic and tragic experience of all is the war in Vietnam and the spill-over onto its immediate neighbours, the Khmer Republic and the Royal Kingdom of Laos.

The period has seen some of the most bitter fightings in the history of man in this part of the world.

Mr Chairman, the lesson of the Vietnam war is loud and clear—none of the three superpowers can advance its position of influence without being stale-mated by another. The last few years have shown great rivalries and competition for influence by the superpowers which can frustrate one another's ambitions very competently—but at great losses to themselves and with greater sacrifices and cruel sufferings to the peoples caught between them!

There is a well-known saying in Malaysia—

“Gajah sama gajah berjuang,
pelanduk mati di tengah-tengah” which, in English means—
“When two elephants fight together in the jungle, the mouse-deer which gets caught in between them invariably gets killed.”

The experience of the last decade during which period, we smaller countries in Southeast Asia, have suffered as a result of the machinations of the great powers within the mosaic of world power politics—this experience has led my Government, as you are aware, to advocate a policy of neutralisation of the whole region of Southeast Asia to be guaranteed by the three superpowers concerned.

This means that we intend to give notice to these super-powers of our intentions to chart for ourselves our own future and determine our own destiny and that we, as countries in this

region, should take no part in the world power game; neither should we be used willingly or otherwise as pawns, but be given the right to maintain strict neutrality in the international struggle for influence and political gain.

This is our strategy for the future.

We do not expect, of course, that this strategy can be implemented immediately, but in the view of my Government, it is the best answer which will gradually allow us to extricate our countries from the present international dilemma and will help solve many of the problems which exist in this area in the present day.

We sincerely hope that the super-powers concerned will view in all seriousness this determination of ours to remain neutral.

However, the pre-requisite of the success of such a strategy of neutrality is that all of us, the countries in this region, must be prepared and willing to gear ourselves towards this direction and show a positive willingness to embark upon a course of genuine neutrality and not take any sides in the cold war conflicts.

Mr Chairman, Distinguished guests, the question of national and regional development and our respective programme towards self-reliance are important and vital ingredients of this strategy for the future.

In the next two to three days, you will be deliberating together here in Kuala Lumpur to find ways and means to unlock the treasures of our natural environment, to capitalise on our rich endowment of human resources and re-orientate, restructure and modernise our growing economies.

For our future to be secured and for the welfare of our respective societies to be advanced, it is our task to strengthen and consolidate every fibre of our inter-relationship in the economic and social fields.

We have risen in the past to the challenges of turbulence and turmoil in the region.

There is, therefore, no reason to doubt that we would be able to proceed with confidence to establish and create for ourselves more just and prosperous societies.

We are all dedicated to pursue a common goal and to seek an enduring basis for sound economic and social development and co-operation among us.

The potentials of our region of Southeast Asia are vast; so also are our collective resources which are considerable by any method of comparison.

With the determination to fight against time by taking immediate action and matching the effort with stamina and the will to succeed, we must undertake and sustain the development of our natural heritage within the setting of security and peace.

The size and range of our natural resources, the large population and our strategic location offer vast opportunities for development.

Present information indicates that Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia have the major portion of the Region's mineral wealth; tin, copper, nickel, iron-ore, bauxite, magnesium, chromite, sulphur, coal, gold and silver are found and produced in the region.

Excluding the Soviet Union, Indonesia is by far the largest producer of crude oil in Asia.

All the countries in Southeast Asia may well benefit from an oil boom during the decade of the seventies if major deposits are discovered beneath the seas of the region.

Let us speed up all action we can towards the attainment of this reality.

The forest reserves in Southeast Asia constitute one of its valuable assets as well as one of the world's major remaining sources of hardwood.

Facts and figures are not available as to how much of these forest reserves of valuable timber in certain areas of the region have been obliterated by indiscriminate military bombing, but let us hope that hostilities will stop soon before such resources are completely ruined.

The marine resources of the region have not yet been effectively exploited.

I recommend that more attention be given to this, so that marine surveys can be carried out immediately on a regional basis without further delay.

Labour has yet to be fully utilised in Southeast Asia and could be tapped more effectively by the countries for National Development.

What I have especially in mind, is the untapped resources of millions of young people in the region—they represent one of the greatest assets which must be combined with the natural resources of the region to create better and more prosperous societies.

I suggest that this Ministerial Conference might consider working out regional co-operative programmes to train and motivate our youth in the region for the task of economic and social development.

I think that inter-country exchange programmes for youth would not only help in giving more stimulus to youth training programmes, but would also help in bringing together the "up and coming" young generation of each of our countries and bring about greater understanding between our various peoples of Southeast Asia.

In our fight against poverty, ignorance and disease, in raising the standard of living, no one nation can do it alone successfully.

We must continuously work together as real partners in development to achieve the common goal; almost all countries in Southeast Asia are participants.

Most of us are members of a number of other regional organisations with an economic orientation—the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the FAO and the UNDP, all of which are designed to promote sound economic and social development.

It appears to me that our economic strategy for the future comprises national as well as regional efforts at developing the resources of the area so that income levels will be raised and a better distribution of wealth among peoples in the region achieved.

Co-operation and joint endeavours may aim at enhancing the region's collective market power as a means of securing greater access to and a stronger position in world markets for the products, thus making more efficient use of regional resources in the aggregate.

However, for most developing countries, and for Southeast Asia in particular, it is not sufficient to depend only on their limited domestic markets.

If they are to grow satisfactorily, they must be given opportunities in an expanding world trade and have access to high-income markets of developed countries as well, to sell their manufactured goods and semi-processed and processed raw materials.

It is only in this way that they can hope to industrialise and generate employment opportunities sufficient to absorb the rapidly increasing number of workers.

In this respect, Japan's role and participation in this Ministerial Conference for the economic development of Southeast Asia is significant and can make valuable contributions to the attainment of our common objective.

Her extraordinary economic growth in recent years has transformed it into the world's third largest economy.

Japan, with less than one third of the population of Southeast Asia, has produced in 1970 a GNP estimated at US\$200 billion or five times the GNP's of countries in the region added together.

Japan's foreign exchange reserves in mid-1970 amounted to about US\$4 billion, that is, more than the GNP of some of the countries represented here.

Japan has a long history of trade with Southeast Asia and has increased this relationship in recent years.

Estimates indicate that by 1975, 30% of Southeast Asia's exports will go to Japan and about 40% of its imports will be from Japan.

Indications are that Japan's economic involvement in the region will increase considerably during the decade of the Seventies.

This Ministerial Conference may wish to consider measures and proposals to ensure that the Southeast Asian Region share adequately in the benefits of this increasing involvement.

Mr Chairman and Distinguished Delegates, it may be appropriate at this juncture to pause and consider in what way this Conference can be really effective and meaningful in the context of meeting the new problems arising from rapidly changing circumstances of today and tomorrow.

We believe we have all the elements necessary to chart our future with confidence in the direction that we all aspire.

Our common objective could only be achieved if we are prepared and willing to think, deliberate and work together, to intensify our efforts for our common endeavours and to manifest our ability to stand together and to bring fulfilment to the rising expectations of the masses.

Our success and the success of your deliberations in this Conference, will by itself earn the respect of super-powers towards our sovereignty and our integrity.

This indeed will be the permanent guarantee for the neutrality, stability, progress and prosperity of our region.

Once again, Mr Chairman, and Distinguished Delegates, I sincerely wish that your deliberations will be conducted within the context for the future and am confident your Conference will be fruitful and productive.

With this hope and confidence, I have great pleasure in declaring this Sixth Ministerial Conference for the Economic Development of Southeast Asia Region open.

Thank you.