

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, AT THE
OPENING OF ROTARY INTERNATIONAL
DISTRICT 330 CONFERENCE AT DEWAN
SRI PINANG, PENANG, ON 17TH MARCH,
1973

Mr William, Governor Rotary District 330, Honourable Dr Lim Chong Eu,¹ Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is both an honour and pleasure for me to be invited to this august assembly and to declare open the 38th Annual Conference of Rotary International District 330 which embraces most of the nations in Southeast Asia.

At the same time, it gives me my special pleasure to welcome distinguished Rotarians from Laos, Khmer, South Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore and Brunei who are assembled here to further the ideals and objectives of the Rotary Movement.

I am sure, many of you are no strangers to our shores, and I hope your indefatigable District Governor and his fellow Penang Rotarians will have done everything possible to make your stay here pleasant and enjoyable. My friend, the Chief Minister, who works ceaselessly to project the image of his Island State, will certainly never allow his guests to feel amiss of Penang's hospitality.

According to the programme schedule, your Conference will, during the next few days, devote its attention mainly on matters pertaining to your organisation and further explore new channels to establish the principles of service and good fellowship as advocated in the Rotary Charter.

However, I have no doubt that, as leading members of society in your respective countries, you are keeping abreast with the changing situation in this region of ours, particularly the hope which we all share of enduring peace after the agreement for a ceasefire in Vietnam and in Laos.

Against this background, therefore, that I consider this an excellent opportunity for me to share some thoughts with you on the future of this region and the role which community service

¹ Y.B. Ketua Menteri Pulau Pinang.

organisations such as yours can play in building bridges of understanding between nations through a greater commitment to civic action.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Two weeks ago, the curtain came down on the Final Act of the International Conference on Vietnam in which all the parties concerned in the conflict as well as those made responsible for safeguarding the peace signified their guarantee to end the war, and the maintenance of peace in that war-torn part of the world.

Thus, the region of Southeast Asia enters a new era of peace and freedom after a long period of intervention by various outside powers in their internal affairs. Unlike our generation, our children today learn about empire rule and colonialism only in the history books. In the whole of Southeast Asia, only the Portuguese are still clinging on the their vestigial colony of Portuguese Timor. This indeed is the most propitious period in our history.

Our hopes are further buttressed by the fact that the continuing detente among the super-powers could usher in an era of peace which would allow smaller nations to pursue national reconstruction and development without hindrance and with intense zeal and determination. The bipolar world of yesteryears is giving way to a multipolar world in which the principal actors are a pentagon of powers, namely, the United States, the Soviet Union, the E.E.C., China and Japan. It is up to us, the nations of Southeast Asia, to take cognizance of the emerging new international power structure to determine how they will affect our destiny and how we should position ourselves in order to ensure enduring peace and stability in this region.

On looking back, it may seem all too easy for some to denigrate the compromise and alignments which are forced upon us in the past quarter of a century. In the circumstances, and considering the temper of the times, these alignments were natural and necessary to preserve the new nation-states of Southeast Asia from the militant threat to which they were exposed from within and without.

There is no denying that external or externally-inspired aggression was the ever-present threat which occupied the minds

of national leaders when they forged their alliances of alignment with one or other of the major powers. Above all, these alliances did yield some benefits. They in fact helped to preserve these states from disintegration due to externally-inspired insurgencies and enabled them to consolidate their newly won independence.

However, today a new pattern has emerged and the nature of the threat has changed in character. The likelihood of invasion by foreign powers has diminished and the threat now manifests itself in the form of subversion and insurgency. Both these diseases will only thrive on the body politic of a country if the government fails to meet the aspiration of its citizens because the socio-economic structure does not assure a fair share for all its nationals.

But now it is no longer possible to seek the assistance of the major powers who, in any case, are already disengaging themselves from the area. To my mind, the best approach to effectively counter this insidious threat is for the respective governments to formulate policies designed to remedy grievances arising out of socio-economic ills and to inculcate in their people a real sense of belonging and participation.

In the final analysis, the responsibility for countering subversion and insurgency should be the concern of each state and the growing sense of nationalism demands that these problems be dealt with by each country without recourse to aid and succour from any outside power.

While we pursue the policy of self-reliance and consolidating national resilience, we must also strive to eliminate any feeling of alienation that might prevail because it is important that no single nation should harbour the feeling of being in a hostile environment. It is necessary, therefore, to initiate dialogues and establish contacts where these had been neglected in the past. The recent meeting of ASEAN Foreign Ministers agreed to expand the membership of ASEAN at the opportune moment so as to reflect a more genuine Southeast Asian composition and to bring about a greater degree of regional solidarity, cohesion and resilience.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

What I have outlined hitherto is a tentative programme of action at the governmental level. These efforts should be supplemented by action at people-to-people level if regional co-operation is to have more significance for the common man.

It is here that organisations such as yours can make a meaningful contribution and give substance to the ideals of regionalism. The social problems resulting from a quarter century of conflict in Indochina are vast in magnitude and they cannot all be solved through Governmental action alone, but call for the services of dedicated individuals and organisations.

In order to resolve these, people-to-people contacts and programmes have to be initiated and extended. The war-ravaged people who have known nothing but the horrors of war for more than a generation would require a long period of rehabilitation and eventual resettlement. There is tremendous scope in this area for social action and your organisation could rise admirably to this challenge.

As I have said earlier, the actions which Governments in Southeast Asia take to help in the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Indochina must be complemented by similar efforts at the private level. Not only must nations be made to feel they are not living in a hostile environment, but ordinary people must also be made to feel same. Your organisation can help to create conditions in which no segment of the people in any country in Southeast Asia need feel alienated. Through the channels of goodwill and fellowship, we can inculcate in them a sense of belonging and participation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I have already stated elsewhere before, Malaysia, on her part, will bear its fair share in the regional efforts to assist in the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Indochina. This is an obligation which springs from our close identification with economic and social programmes designed for regional upliftment.

We feel that as real peace comes to Indochina, the alienation which the nations there felt towards the rest of Southeast Asia, must be overcome. In this way, Malaysia, with her ASEAN partners, will help bring about normalcy in the region.

The dawning of peace in Indochina coupled with the withdrawal of foreign powers from Southeast Asia will enable the peoples of the region to embark on concerted and peaceful task of building up Southeast Asia as a region of peace, neutrality and prosperity. Towards this end, we should apply our traditional spirit of self-help to marshal the rich human and natural resources of our respective countries to create a united, peaceful, progressive region which can provide our people with a standard of living and way of life that they will be proud to leave to the later generations.

Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am quite aware that the Rotary Movement is essentially a band of leaders in business and the professions. Your expertise and experience will, therefore, be in great demand to fulfil the task of building the new Southeast Asia that we envision. Since Rotarians are motivated by the motto "Service before Self", I am convinced that you and your movement will be sufficiently motivated and inspired to rise to noble heights of endeavour and give of your best in service to our Southeast Asian Community.

On that note, I have much pleasure to officially declare open the 38th Annual Conference of Rotary International District 330, and to wish your deliberations all success.