

THE FIRST ASIAN CONFERENCE ON FOOD SAFETY

SHANGRI-LA HOTEL, KUALA LUMPUR (K.L), 03 SEPTEMBER 1990

Distinguished guests;

Ladies and gentlemen.

I would like to thank the organisers for inviting me to address this First Asian Conference on Food Safety. Food safety is an increasingly important issue that is of personal interest to all of us, to our families and to our nations.

2. This Conference provides an opportunity for developing countries in the region to discuss matters relating to food safety as well as trade and economic goals in a concerted and positive manner. This Conference also presents a timely opportunity for those of you in government as well as industry to consider the various approaches towards improving food safety in all the countries of Asia where more than half the world's population live. To ensure some measure of success, political commitment at the highest levels will be needed to give the necessary momentum.

Ladies and gentlemen,

3. The world food situation is generally more positive now than it was a decade ago. In some parts of the world, food surpluses rather than food shortages is seen as the problem. However, food production worldwide is only increasing at about 2.6% per year, slightly faster than the growth of the world's population. The perspective of feeding the world has also changed considerably. There is still hunger in the world, but this is mostly caused by war and civil strife, disorganization in transportation and distribution, and poor purchasing power.

4. Although the subject of this Conference is scientific in nature, we cannot totally ignore the social and economic factors, which, if not addressed, will impede the implementation of food safety programmes worldwide. Today there is a vast and growing difference in income and wealth between rich and poor nations, and in many instances between the rich and the poor within each nation. And, we have seen, in many developing countries, there are people eking out a meagre hand-to-mouth existence, who in times of economic recession, may be forced to face food shortages, which could be further aggravated by the problems of food safety.

5. Food safety currently appears to be one of the most widespread health problems in the world. Some of the underlying causes of this problem are as old as the human race, while others are the results of more recent developments of modern society. The widespread use of agrochemicals is an example of the double edged sword of modern technology -- without them our food production would be severely limited, but their use also poses risks to our environment and health and in some instances to food sources themselves. While scientific progress has offered the advantages of a more abundant, diverse and safer food supply, assuring the safety of food requires constant vigilance based on the most

modern and up-to-date methods and knowledge.

Ladies and gentlemen,

6. In the past few years, a number of food trade issues have clouded relations between producing developing countries and the developed consumer and producer countries. Unjustified claims as a basis of health and safety by those able to mount massive propaganda campaigns have actually deprived consumers of cheap sources of food generally coming from developing countries. In the process the producer countries in the developing south have suffered. The reason for the campaign is not the concern with health and safety but is due to purely economic considerations of the parties concerned. Such irresponsible behaviour is not contributing to food safety or to overcoming poverty or food shortages. Another trade barrier is the over-zealous implementation of quarantine measures which prevent direct exports of fresh produce and animal products from developing countries. Specifications and standards demanded by importers have to be realistic. Advancements in analytical techniques have made possible the detection of contaminants, at first in parts per million, then, parts per billion and now parts per trillion. Scientists will continue to chase the elusive zero, but is this realistic for implementation?

7. Efforts are being made, at the current round of negotiations under the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs to use available international standards in adjudicating disputes involving issues of safety and health. The world is moving towards a common set of criteria for assessing food safety, and it is these global criteria which will have to be accepted at the national level. This Conference, therefore, comes at a critical time when we all must rationalize our food safety decisions and improve our understanding of the wider areas of food safety. In this context, it is imperative that we think globally, yet act locally to assure our consistency with international food safety standards. While those in the region must help themselves and each other in achieving the international standard, international cooperation is also required since the world food trade is now truly global. And, through experience, to be more effective these international activities should be undertaken at the regional level.

8. In addition to the global trade aspects of food safety, developing countries of Asia further face prevalent problems of foodborne diseases, largely caused by poor food handling practices. According to reports of the World Health Organization, gastrointestinal infections are among the main causes of morbidity among infants and young children in deprived societies. Although the problem of foodborne diarrhoea is worldwide, it is particularly acute in developing countries, where nutritionally inadequate diets render the problem even more severe. Foodborne diarrhoea is a major contributor to malnutrition and may trigger very serious chronic diseases.

9. Reports from developed countries indicate that most foodborne diseases are caused by microbiologically contaminated food, and the source of the contamination has, rightly or wrongly, been attributed to products or tourists coming from the developing countries, or the ethnic food handlers working in the

countries concerned. Statistical data also show that in many countries, including developed countries, the incidence of these diseases has dramatically increased over the past several years.

10. Microbial foodborne diseases are not the only food safety problem that is of concern to developing countries of Asia. Currently, the use of pesticides, growth hormones, antibiotics, illegal additives, as well as environmental and industrial pollution, have increased the multitude of food safety problems. On the other hand, affluent societies suffer from improper diets which lead to obesity, hypertension and cardiac arrest.

Ladies and gentlemen,

11. The safety of food is a complex issue. It is an issue to health authorities, it is an issue to producers, and it is an issue to consumers. Around the world, it has resulted in deaths of many innocent victims, losses to food companies in terms of closures, loss of consumer confidence, lost working hours, hospitalizations and compensations, not to mention the cost of lengthy legal proceedings. It has affected the image of many countries. Food safety programmes vary tremendously from country to country.

12. Developing countries have to collectively overcome the many constraints facing them. We need to have adequate and effective laws and regulations which are constantly updated to keep pace with changes in social structures, food habits, modern agriculture and food technology. Given the multidisciplinary nature of food safety, there must be coordinated interministerial approach among the different implementing agencies in each country. Proper infrastructure and basic laboratory facilities have to be provided and inspection services upgraded. These physical provisions will not be of much use if trained human resources are neglected. This is where international cooperation will be most appreciated.

13. There must also be community awareness of issues involved in food safety and these programmes should be integrated into primary health care systems. Consumers also have a key role to play in assuring food safety. By increasing their awareness and knowledge of food safety, consumers can learn to protect themselves and their families from foodborne hazards both in the market place and their own homes.

14. Talking about consumers, I sometimes wonder how knowledgeable consumers in developed countries really are. Lately there is an attempt to mislead consumers in the developed countries with such labelling as "no tropical oil". All these labellings put doubts in the consumer's mind, and question the role of food control authorities. Ingredient labelling, required by law, is meant to inform consumers, but not to deceive them. If it is wrong to deceive consumers regarding the "goodness" of certain food when such is not proven, surely it must be equally wrong to deceive consumers on the "badness" of the food concerned when such is not proven. It is even more wrong when the intention is to get a competitive edge for another product.

15. Food scientists, like all scientists, have been reluctant to voice their opinions for fear of being quoted inaccurately. It should be a scientist' s responsibility and the journalist' s desire to be clear to the public. This some- times means using non-scientific language but it should not mean sacrificing accuracy. Too often the expert explains scientific consensus, and may feel the job is completed by mere accurate transmission of facts. But telling a mother the residue she just fed her baby has less than a one in a million cancer risk does not reduce her fear, but alienates her further. On the other hand, the mass media should be more responsible in their reporting, and not cause consumer alarm with their "media outbreak".

16. Malaysia has recognized the importance of a safe food supply and has given it top priority. This recognition does not mean that Malaysia has overcome the problems associated with unsafe food. We have experienced many cases of foodborne outbreaks, the most serious one being in 1988 which cost the lives of 13 innocent children. We are committed to doing everything possible to ensure that conditions associated with this tragic incident would not recur.

Ladies and gentlemen,

17. The changing nature of the food business will bring about new problems, still unforeseen. Legislators must take into account food risk-benefit arguments as they set the climate for food regulations. Through meetings like this, the common goal of meeting the target of health through food safety, can be achieved through developing national capabilities and enhancing our economic viability. Given the scar- city of our resources, priorities must be established, and priority must be given to the never ending process of improving the provision of basic human needs and economic infrastructure.

Ladies and gentlemen,

18. I wish this conference every success in its deliberations. With this remark I now have much pleasure to declare open the First Asian Conference on Food Safety