

**THE OFFICIAL DINNER HOSTED BY HIS EXCELLENCY KHAMTAY SIPHAND
ONE PRIME MINISTER OF THE LAO PEOPLE**

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC, IN VIENTIANE, 16 APRIL 1994

Your Excellency Mr. Khamtay Siphandone and Madame Thongvanh Siphandone;

Distinguished Guests;

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for my wife and I to have been invited to visit your beautiful country. We feel privileged to be here at a time when the Lao people are still celebrating the Lao New Year. Please allow me then, on this auspicious occasion, to wish Your Excellency and Madam Thongvanh as well as the Government and people of the Lao People's Democratic Republic a very happy and prosperous New Year.

2. I would also like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to your Excellency and your Government for the warm reception, hospitality and excellent arrangements accorded to me and my delegation. We are touched by the warmth and friendliness of your people. Our stay, although brief, would surely be a most memorable one.

3. I still recall Your Excellency's visit to Malaysia in December 1992 during which we exchanged views on various issues of mutual interest. I emphasised then that your visit would symbolise the beginning of a new era in bilateral relations between Malaysia and Laos. Our bilateral relations indeed have been enhanced considerably since then. There is now better understanding between us. There is obviously a mutual need to promote cooperation in various fields. It is with this objective in mind that I have accepted your invitation to visit this country to continue the dialogue we had begun. I welcome this opportunity to engage in further discussions and to exchange views with Your Excellency. I am very encouraged by the outcome of our meeting earlier today which provides further impetus for enhancing bilateral relations between Malaysia and Laos. Your Excellency,

4. This visit is, for me, a very significant one. This is my first visit to Laos. Indeed, this is the first visit ever by a Malaysian Prime Minister to this enchanting country. I have included in my delegation Ministers, senior officials and leading figures from the Malaysian private sector. It is my hope that they will all have the opportunity to learn more about your country and to get to know Laotians as part of our common effort to create better understanding between the peoples of the two countries.

5. This afternoon, we reviewed the status of our bilateral relations. We also had a useful exchange of views on regional and international issues. We agreed that more could be done to strengthen our friendship and cooperation. Today, we witnessed the signing of the Bilateral Payments Arrangement Agreement (BPA) between the two central banks. This is another important milestone in the development of economic relations and the promotion of trade between our two countries. The BPA has proven to be a successful mechanism for increasing trade among developing countries. I am confident that the BPA, together with the Investment Guarantee Agreement already signed in 1992, would contribute much to our economic relations. Malaysian companies are also confident of the economic policies being pursued by the Government of your country. This is reflected in the business arrangements between Malaysian businessmen and their Laotian counterparts. Your Excellency,

6. Consistent with our common desire to work together closely within the context of regional and South-South Cooperation, Malaysia will continue to support and assist Laos in its development efforts. A prosperous Laos means a prosperous Southeast Asia. And a prosperous Southeast Asia is an important prerequisite to peace and stability in the region.

7. This afternoon, I had the opportunity to visit the Friendship Bridge. More than a magnificent structure, it symbolises friendship and cooperation between our two countries. The bridge represents not only an avenue for communication and commerce between Laos and Thailand, but also a vital link between different parts of Southeast Asia. The bridge could be the precursor to more vital linkages that will bring countries in the region much closer in a web of interlocking trade and economic relations and other activities.

8. I foresee that with the opening of the Friendship Bridge, the recent completion of the North-South Highway in Malaysia, the building of a second linkage between Malaysia and Singapore, the improvement of highways in Thailand and the future construction of major road networks in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, there would be an increased flow of goods and people among the countries concerned. Your Excellency,

9. Laos is now an observer in ASEAN. I believe Laos has gained better insights into ASEAN's organisation and structure, and the ASEAN way of doing things. The path is now clear for Laos to participate in ASEAN programmes involving cooperation in various fields. Malaysia would most warmly welcome Laos when it decides to eventually become a member of ASEAN. I would again reiterate that ASEAN would be strengthened by the membership of all the ten countries of Southeast Asia.

10. Malaysia and Laos also share a deep commitment towards the pursuit of international peace and security. Malaysia feels strongly that serious efforts should be made to ensure the continued stability of the East Asian region. As such it is important that all countries cooperate fully to ensure prosperity and progress for the peoples of this region.