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"ASIA AND THE WORLD CENTURY:

PROSPECTS FOR PEACE, PROGRESS AND PROSPERITY"

1. I have been requested to speak on the topic of "Asia and the World Century: Prospects for Peace, Progress and Prosperity". I believe it is more correct for us to refer to the coming 21st Century as the 'world century'. We are only three short years away from entering the new millennium. Whether we are ready or not to cross the threshold, none of us can delay the process. Time after all waits for no man. Perhaps it is worthwhile if we can give some thought and ponder upon the likely changes that the next century will bring. If we care for our future well-being, if we believe in the progress of human civilisation, if indeed we believe in the goodness of peace and the higher human values, then we should try to understand the signs of our times, the possible trends and the coming technologies and direct them in the best interest of the world. We should always be doing this of course but the beginning of a century, and in this case the beginning of a new millennium, is more appropriate than at any other time for us to launch a new endeavour. And since the world today is more interconnected and interdependent than at the beginning of any century in the past, since communication of all kinds is so good, we would be losing a unique opportunity if we sail into the new century and millennium without understanding and without a road-map for our future.

2. I am no futurist but I must admit to being a dreamer who believes in ideals. For that reason I think we should work to make the 21st Century a century of the world, a new world, a single Commonwealth of all nations, which excludes no country or community, but which includes all of humanity. This 'new world century' should be characterised by true 'liberte, egalite and fraternite', both at home and within the comity of nations. It must consists of nations and people who are responsible, productive, democratic as well as able to show greater mutual respect, appreciation, consideration and concern for the interests and feelings of others. It will also be one where great efforts are made by the rich to assist the poor in the noble bid to enrich one and all. How can we in the 21st century and the third millennium call ours a civilisation if the rich enrich themselves while impoverishing the already poor. Yet the end of the 20th century and the second millennium is seeing just that with no sign yet that it will be reversed. Still we have three more years to retrieve the ideals of a more humane civilisation.

3. I know that there are those who believe that clashes between nations will be replaced by the clashes of civilisations. It will be a sad day for humankind if this really happens. Instead, what we should all work towards is a fruitful co-existence of civilisations. We have so much to gain if efforts are made to build a new world civilisation which comprises the best that each and every one of our civilisation has to offer. I am referring to a world civilisation that is richly endowed with the very best of cultures and value systems from Asia, Europe, Africa -- of

even the smallest of community or tribe, making it a celebration of civilisations. Given the rapid technological advances we have made, particularly in the speed and ease of transportation and in Information Technology, geographical lines drawn on maps are virtually 'disappearing'. In an increasingly borderless world, no country can be an island, no society can exclude external influences and developments. Similarly, no single nation or people or region can claim the right to inherit the future, but rather all nations and peoples should have the opportunity and freedom to shape their own future.

4. Malaysia is a small vulnerable country and is not in a position to shape the future of the world. So pardon us if we dare to think of the world and the future of mankind. But what I would like to do is to debunk the idea of an 'Asian Century'. And this is not because of the current currency blight. We had said it repeatedly before, that there would be no Asian century, no Asian dominance, even though Asian values will remain to enrich the world century, the celebration of civilisation, that the world should embrace. The more likely scenario to emerge would be new centres of economic power. They would certainly not be all Asian. There will be as there are now, European and American powers -- each a match for any of the others. All of these economic powerhouses -- be they in the West or East -- will act as the locomotives of growth for the rest of the world. As such, there should not be any fear or gloating over the possibility of the 21st Century becoming an Asian Century. We should downplay this 'Asian Century' obsession but promote the Century of the World, where global interests take precedence over the narrow aspirations of nations and continents, race and colour and ideology. Nor should we gloat that there would be no 'Asian Century'. Rather we should be relieved that no one would dominate the world of the future.

5. By speaking out against "the Asian Century", it does not mean that Asia does not have a vital role to play. The Asian region, in particular the Asia-Pacific region, is experiencing an unprecedented period of peace and prosperity. There is also a growing trend and inclination among regional states to enhance dialogue on political cooperation and cooperation for peace and coexistence. In addition, Asia is also considered to be the most dynamic region of the world in terms of economic growth, currency turmoil notwithstanding. The Asia we know today is vastly different from what it was at the beginning of the current century. Some of the most dynamic economies on earth -- China, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan -- were once ravaged by war and famine and we bereft of essential technologies and skills. But over the last quarter of this century, Asia has produced more economic growth for more countries than any other region in the history of mankind. I am confident this trend will continue. Allow me to quote you some general statistics. According to World Bank predictions, Asia, in particular East Asia is expected to grow at over seven percent annually until the year 2004. That's two and a half times faster than the rest of the world. Even if the vibrant economies of Korea, Japan and the South East Asian nations experience some slow-down, this is likely to be temporary. The huge potential of China and India even if mildly stimulated would contribute an enormous amount towards the generation of wealth for the world. Furthermore, it is also forecast that by 2020, four of the world's ten largest economies will be in Asia, namely Japan, China,

Korea and India. Over this same period of time, Asia' s share of world GDP is also said to be able to expand to 35 percent as compared to the current 28 percent.

6. I am aware that even as I am saying this, there are many cynics out there who question and are waiting expectantly for the Asian economies and more precisely the Southeast Asian economies to stumble and fall, never to recover or achieve the growth rates predicted. No doubt, we are facing new challenges as a result of the currency and market turbulence. This setback I must insist, is only temporary and transient. I am confident, given the general resilience of the ASEAN region and its strong economic fundamentals, we will bounce back to emerge stronger and more robust. We have never been quitters. We are not going to be diverted from the primacy of economics and our commitment to pragmatism.

7. In the Asian region, peace and economic development are closely linked. We need a peaceful and secure environment to enable our governments to focus upon developing the economy. No nation can be expected to fully concentrate upon developing its economy if it does not feel secure. A secure climate is one where nations are not acting defensively or looking over their shoulders. Likewise, greater economic development which will improve the standard of living of the people also contributes to a lessening of tension and hostility, particularly on the domestic front. History has amply demonstrated that people who are prosperous desire peace, for peace is essential to continued prosperity. On the other hand poor countries do not value peace and are prone to military adventures abroad, to deflect the minds of their people by focusing their hatred on the enemy and to acquire rich lands and subject peoples to augment the little resources they have. But history has also shown that conquests are no solution to domestic problems. And so we should discard confrontation and espouse peace and friendship between neighbours far and near. And thus we will achieve prosperity which in turn will give us a vested interest in maintaining peace.

8. What then does the future hold for Asia? One thing for sure, Asia must be able to manage reform and deal with changes in a borderless and more integrated world. Domestic reforms, the need to strengthen regional cooperation and friendship as well as to strive for a more equal and productive new world order therefore become essential for a successful Asia. We have done well thus far but we cannot afford to rest. There is so much more for us to do if we want to contribute to the century of the world.

9. I believe Asia will continue to support and implement the concept of open regionalism and constructive engagement. We have also shown our willingness to accept a borderless world where capital moves unhindered between countries and regions. We have liberalised and deregulated within our borders and between borders and we are ready to accept a world regime in which everyone has a say in shaping and enforcing rules, regulations and laws. As much as we believe in the rule of law within our borders, we think the removal of national laws should not result in the absence of the rule of law in the borderless world.

10. Today, in Asia, particularly in Southeast Asia, aggressive territorial acquisitions appear to be the last thing on the minds of the leaders. Peace and good neighbourliness seem to be the preferred creed. However, this does not mean that we face no serious challenges. Issues like drug trafficking and international criminal activities, money laundering and white-collar crimes pose real challenges which add to the complexity of maintaining stability and peace. Furthermore, we must also address the issue of poverty. There are at least 800 million people who are still living in abject poverty in the Asia-Pacific region. Several hundred millions are denied access to the basic necessities of life -- food, clean water and air, shelter, education, health and employment. The issue of poverty thus becomes a major challenge, particularly in the domestic arena. People who live in poverty often feel alienated, leading to disenchantment with government and society. Their protests and their violent reactions very often retard the economic growth of their own countries and render them incapable of overcoming the poverty which the protests were supposed to draw attention to and to remedy. The 21st Century will not be a World Century if the rich of the world ignore the poverty of the poor and the deprived. Certainly the rich of the world must not be so avaricious as to impoverish the poor in order to enrich themselves further. They must instead contribute or even make sacrifices in order to ensure a more equitable distribution of wealth. In doing so they will ensure peace and prosperity for themselves and for others.

11. Trade, world trade should generate the wealth that will create prosperous nations and peoples. After the collapse of the communist bloc there should be a lessening of tension between nations. The need for arms should be reduced as war on the world scale no longer threatens us. Bush wars will erupt here and there, However the weapons for such wars are not those of mass destruction. No one should possess them or be allowed to develop them. To avoid dominance by anyone, there should be a truly functional international force, manned by all nationals and lead by a mixed command.

12. Today a lot is being spent in the search for more lethal conventional weapons. The costly development results in a huge weapons market to help recover costs. Countries are being persuaded to buy newer and more costly weapons by creating a fear of potential enemies and their hegemonistic tendencies.

13. If we believe in prosperity as the weapon against war then we will not need the kind of weapons we are producing and selling now. But we will need weapon against criminals, pirates, drug smugglers, white slaves and the like. We don' t need to kill them. We need to be able to paralyse them, to immobilise them from a distance. Laser technology, blinding light, loud explosions have all been invented and used effectively. But surely more can be done, more research in non-lethal but effective weapons for use in bushfire wars, for neutralising lethal weapons in the hands of warring parties or armed criminals, for exploding mines from a distance and for self-protection.

14. A great new arms industry can be created but the arms will be of the kind

mentioned. We will hold exhibition, to promote the sale of such weapons, of aircrafts which fight fires and cause rain to fall, of ways of creating clouds and moving them to the right places, to render deserts fertile, to cool the atmosphere, reduce humidity, cause snowfalls. New weapons will attack storms and hurricanes, calm the seas, generate power and tame volcanoes and other natural catastrophes.

15. Fanciful perhaps. But who predicted the powerful microchip, the lap-tops, the laser beams and others. No one really. But they were discovered, harnessed and developed.

16. I am a great believer in human ingenuity. The most important thing is to identify and recognise the problem or to set the objective. Then the concerned politicians would allocate the necessary resources and in time the solution or the weapon would be invented.

17. The next century should see a world bent on creating and sharing wealth and resources for everyone. It is an insult to civilisation that despite our intelligence and resource there are so many who still live in poverty and misery. We are still in the Dark Ages. Many are still thinking of doing others in. Many play the game of enriching themselves at the expense of impoverishing others. And many use power in various permutations in order to bludgeon others into submission.

18. And yet if we accept the desirability of creating a world century of Peace, Progress and Prosperity, if we set our mind on achieving it, it is very much within our means to succeed. It is the mindset that needs to be changed. Humanity can do it if we want to do it.