

The Official Opening Of POLMET 2000

Shangri-La Hotel, Kuala Lumpur 20 March 2000

I wish to thank the organisers for inviting me to declare open this conference. It is indeed a great honour that the first POLMET conference to be held in the new millennium is taking place in Kuala Lumpur. It is also very timely.

2. Urbanisation is taking place at a very rapid rate in Asia, as its city and town populations continue to grow. The region already has the largest population in the world, and about 700 million people now living in cities and towns. By year 2015, it is estimated that the region will have more than one billion people living in cities. There will be nine megacities with populations of more than 10 million and 17 very large cities with populations of more than five million. Economically and environmentally sustainable urban development in Asia is therefore a pressing need to ensure a safe, healthy, convenient and pleasant environment for its growing urban population.

3. We now face the daunting, yet inspiring, task of forging a new relationship with the natural world. Current patterns of population growth, resource use, economic inequities, and environmental degradation cannot extend indefinitely into the future. To ensure human well-being over the long term, people need to move toward consumption patterns that maintain and restore the earth's life support systems and safeguard earth's resources for the use of future generations.

4. This new relationship, between human and the natural world, is captured by the idea of "sustainability", a concept that has emerged in recent decades from a number of international studies and conferences concerned with regional and global trends in population, development and the environment. Sustainability implies meeting human needs while preserving the environment and natural resources for future generations.

5. The term "sustainable development" is used to stress the relationship between continued national development and long-term environmental conditions and goals. It is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

6. Now, how does it apply to the Third World where uneven development, poverty and basic needs are problems which have to be given priority?

7. The disparity between poverty and wealth, levels of development and consumption among nations of the world present contrasting pictures when the developed and the developing worlds are compared. A newborn in the US, for example, requires more than twice as much grain and more than ten times of oil as a child in Brazil or Indonesia ? and produces far more polluting waste. In fact, a simple calculation shows that the annual increase in the US population of 2.6 million people puts more pressure on the world's resources than the 17 million people added in India each year. Unless developed countries choose less resource-intensive lifestyles and develop less polluting technologies, it will be

impossible to make the transition to a sustainable world economy.

8. Studies indicate that by using resource more productively it will be possible in the coming decades to reduce energy and material consumption levels in industrial countries by a factor of four while actually improving the standard of living. And because developed countries are the model that developing countries follow one way or another the decisions they make about lifestyle and technologies could be decisive for the world as a whole. A further comparison between the United States of America and India shows that although the US has 5% of the world's population, compared to India's 16%, the US uses some 25% of the world's energy compared to India's 3%, emits 22% of the world's CO₂ compared to India's 3%, and accounts for 25% of the world's GNP compared to India's 1%. And yet, despite all odds, developing countries like India and others must continue to operate in a world in which the resource gap between most developing and industrial nations is widening, in which the industrial world dominates in the rule-making of some key international bodies, and in which the industrial world has already used much of the Planet's ecological capital. This inequality is the Planet's main 'environmental' problem; it is also its main 'development' problem.

9. International economic relationships pose a particular problem for environmental management in many developing countries including Asia. Agriculture, forestry, energy production and mining generate at least half the GNP of many developing countries and account for even larger shares of livelihoods and employment. Exports of natural resources remain a large factor in their economies, especially for the least developed. Most of these countries face enormous economic pressures, both international and domestic, to over exploit their environmental resource base.

10. Many developing countries now have lower per capita incomes than when the decade began. Rising poverty and unemployment have increased pressure on environmental resources as more people have been forced to rely more directly upon them. Many governments have cut back efforts to protect the environment and to bring ecological considerations into development planning.

11. In Malaysia, we enjoy a relatively high average standard of living and our housing conditions are much better than in most developing countries. Nevertheless, there is a great deal still to be done in our country if we are to respond properly to the challenges presented by sustainable development.

12. The primary objective of Malaysia's housing goal is to ensure that all our citizens, particularly the low income group, have access to adequate, affordable and good shelter. Besides ensuring the adequate supply of houses for the various income groups, our policy also emphasises the importance of a safe, healthy, convenient and beautiful living environment to be achieved through comprehensive settlements planning, including the adequate provision of basic infrastructure and social facilities in housing schemes, as well as landscaping. We believe housing provision should be a vehicle for achieving viable and sustainable units of human settlements that not only address the physical need

for shelter but also our particular national need for social, cultural and ethnic integration.

13. The principles of sustainable development are progressively being incorporated into our planning systems as well as into other policy areas. The government recognises that local authorities have a crucial role to play in developing and implementing policies for sustainable development. They are particularly well qualified to understand local needs and determine priorities for local action. Many non- governmental organisations are also involved in action at the local level. On the environmental front, they include groups concerned with practical conservation, preservation of historic buildings and sites. Housing associations and the private sector, have become increasingly involved in the provision of low-cost accommodation.

14. The success of local initiatives will play a major part in determining whether Malaysia can properly achieve its targets in respect of sustainable development. People need to witness improvement at the local level. Critical to this will be the concept of partnership, bringing together the skills and resources possessed by the government, the private sector and local communities. The government seeks to ensure that the principles of sustainable development are taken into account with the operation of land use planning systems. Also, it will ensure that planning policies and guidelines are kept under review in the light of the understanding of the sustainable development concept. Environmental quality objectives and targets play an important role in guiding policies and environmental improvement. There is a need for the development of a series of indicators to help measure progress towards sustainable development.

15. Like our counterparts in much of the developing world, Asia as a region has the ability to make development sustainable. However, meeting essential needs requires not only a period of economic growth for nations in which the majority are poor, but also an assurance that the poor get their fair share of the resources required to sustain growth.

16. For Asia, it is imperative that growth must be revived. This is where the links between economic growth, the alleviation of poverty, and environmental conditions are essential. Yet developing countries are part of an interdependent world economy; and the levels and patterns of growth in industrialised nations must affect the growth of the developing countries. The mid- term prospects for industrial countries indicate a growth of 3 to 4%, the minimum that international financial institutions consider necessary if these countries are going to play a part in expanding the world economy. Such growth rates could be environmentally sustainable if industrialised nations can continue their recent shifts for less material and energy-intensive activities and the improvement of their efficiency in using materials and energy.

17. However, as industrialised nations use less materials and energy, they will provide smaller markets for commodities and minerals from developing nations. And this must affect the growth of the developing countries unless new markets are found among the developing countries themselves. Unfortunately the attack

by currency traders on the tiger economies of East Asia has stunted their growth as a new market. Malaysia alone lost 250 billion US dollars in purchasing power because of the Ringgit' s devaluation and the depression in the share prices. Those whose activities can destroy wealth and therefore purchasing power must be curbed if we are serious about achieving sustainable development whether in the rich or in the poor countries. But despite the concerns expressed about the environment by the rich, they are unwilling to do anything to curb the currency traders and the short term capitalists.

18. For developing countries to grow a lot more has to be done in terms of technology transfer, foreign direct investments and better terms of trade. These together with a new international financial regime will enable them to grow fast enough to overcome their internal problems. Of late there has been much talk about reforms being more important than growth. This is like putting the cart before the horse. Of what use are banking reforms and best practices if the banks have no money and there is no business to speak of. These can only come if there is growth, and if a certain degree of laxity is needed in order to achieve growth, then we should not be insisting on growth strangling reforms. Poverty we must always remember is almost synonymous with environmental degradation.

19. Future patterns of agriculture and forestry development, energy use, industrialisation and human settlements can be made far less material intensive, and hence both more economically and environmentally efficient. Under these conditions, a new era of growth in the world economy can widen the options available to developing countries. Reforms at international levels are needed to deal simultaneously with economic and ecological problems in ways that allow the world economy to stimulate the growth of developing countries while giving greater weight to environmental concerns.

20. In a region as vast and as diverse as Asia, a uniform application of the sustainable development concept is neither possible nor desirable. Here, the levels of development, standards of living and extremes of poverty vary remarkably from one country to another. Sustainable development needs to be applied gradually in accordance with the ability of individual countries to cope, and with what each country perceives as appropriate.

21. Important as it may seem, we in Asia, however, cannot afford to depend solely on outside help to develop. Most of our initiatives will have to come from within us using our own ingenuity, wisdom, available resources, regional cooperation and a lot of hard work. Although there seems to be some scepticism about the virtues of `Asian values' , this can actually be a source of strength that Asia can capitalise on in its efforts to develop and revitalise the region the `Asian way' . What I mean by Asian values is an absence of extreme individualism, a sense of responsibility for the community, a belief in strong families, a reverence for education, frugality, hard work, national team work, a social contract between the people and the State, moral wholesomeness, a free but responsible press, a belief in citizens as stakeholders, and last but not least respect for the

environment.

22. Much knowledge, know-how and capacity for improved decision making are now available in Asia. However, there is a great need for mechanisms that can transform what one person, group, firm, or nation knows into something that another person, group, firm or nation can use. These mechanisms are today taking the form of collaborations and partnerships rather than the unidirectional technical assistance of earlier efforts.

23. New forms of communication technologies now make possible a global electronic network that connects us to people in all countries and occupations. It allows us to access and assess the scientific and technical knowledge that we need to solve local problems and enhance the quality of our lives, as well as to communicate our own knowledge, insights, and needs to others. Connecting us to one another is a first step. We then must use these initial connections as a tool for spreading our knowledge, skills, and values throughout our own nations, including our local communities. By taking full advantage of new information technologies, we have an unprecedented opportunity to close the vast 'knowledge gap' between peoples.

24. In this respect, POLMET 2000 KUALA LUMPUR will be an important forum to contribute, learn and exchange ideas and experiences on environmentally sustainable development of cities and urban areas in Asia. I am very pleased to learn that as part of the POLMET 2000 Organising Committee' s efforts to promote networking among delegates attending this conference, a survey has been carried out. I hope that with the help of this information network, this conference will be the start of greater interaction and networking among POLMET delegates, especially through the Internet.