

SPEECH BY: DATO' SERI DR. MAHATHIR BIN MOHAMAD  
( PRIME MINISTER )

EVENT: THE FIFTH SESSION OF THE INTERACTION COUNCIL

VENUE: DEWAN TUN HUSSEIN ONN PUTRA WORLD TRADE CENTRE, KUALA LUMPUR

DATE: 19 APR 1987

TIME:

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Yang Amat Berbahagia Tun Hussein Onn,  
Chairman of ISIS;  
His Excellency Mr. Helmut Schmidt,  
Chairman of the InterAction Council;  
His Excellency Mr. Takeo Fukuda,  
Honourary Chairman of the InterAction  
Council;  
Your Excellencies;  
Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is a distinct honour and a privilege for me to address this distinguished group of eminent international leaders and world statesmen. We have never had this rare occasion to host so many prominent personages in our country before. On behalf of the Government and people of Malaysia may I wish Your Excellencies "Selamat Datang" and a pleasant and productive stay in our country.

Your Excellencies,

2. Everyone of you has the reputation for dedication, courage and breadth of vision; accomplishments which have not only benefitted your respective countries but also the world at large. Each of you has also held high offices, having been at the helm of your respective ship of state steering it through tortuous courses, in fair as well as foul weather. You have experienced the heavy responsibility of power and the agonising decisions-making that determined the fortunes of your respective country. Added to this are the external implications of your actions as no country is an island, particularly in this rapidly shrinking planet.

3. Decisions in the national interest in these days cannot help but affect neighbours, regions and the world. This is especially so with powerful nations. It is important and imperative that there be greater accountability not just to the nation but to the world. World leaders are now truly world leaders, not just leaders known to the whole world. International fame must carry with it international responsibility as well. That responsibility cannot just cease because one is out of office. The world should continue to benefit from the experience and knowledge that

you have accumulated while in office. I believe that it is because you do feel responsible that you have founded the InterAction Council of world leaders. In a world gone slightly unbalanced your wise counsels are much needed.

Your Excellencies,

4. You meet today in an atmosphere that is highly charged. Trade imbalances have led to tension and threats among the rich nations of the North. Currency has become totally destabilised. Commodity prices have collapsed. Nations are incapable of paying their debts. The East-West confrontation and the arms race continues and absorbs much needed funds for totally useless unproductive activities. The wars in the Middle East show no sign of abating. Religious and racial tensions have grown, fanned by fanatics and racists. Proxy wars are being fought in Central America and Central Asia. In the Sahel belt of Africa starvation and death stare in the eyes of millions. And to top it all drug habits have destroyed much of the flower of our youths, bringing crime and disaster to people who are already impoverished.

5. It is with this as a backdrop that you meet here in Kuala Lumpur. The theme you have chosen, "International cooperation in the areas of population growth, environment and development," is thus most appropriate and relevant. The considerable influence that you still wield, would, we hope, lend meaning to your deliberations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

6. Within the space of some twelve years from now history will record the flow of time into not only a new century but also a new millennium. Rightly we should be moving into the twenty-first century with a sense of pride and accomplishment considering the tremendous strides that mankind has achieved in the twentieth century. We have seen the world undergo a massive transformation particularly in technological terms. The scientific achievements that have come about are particularly astounding in the fields of communication, transportation, medicine and space. Many of us today fly around the world in a 747 without so much as a minute's reflection upon the fact that the whole aircraft is about twice as long as the distance the Wright brothers were airborne on their maiden flight only eighty years ago.

7. In our enthusiasm for the good life made possible by science and technology, we often forget about the miseries which accompany this so-called progress. There is a price to be paid for all these progress. Far too often it is the poor who have to pay. Thus the miracle of laser and fibre optics have forced the closure of copper mines with the accompanying unemployment of workers in developing countries. Pollution from chemical wastes have blighted the lives of many, of which Bhopal is just one poignant example. Advances in the technology of food production

should reduce starvation. They do, but they also impoverish the farmers of developing countries by the resulting gluts and drops in prices.

8. The art of war has become the science and technology of war. As new weapons and counter-weapons are invented the meagre treasuries of poor countries are emptied in an attempt to acquire expensive defence systems. Even as a country buys a new weapon it is told that it will be obsolete as an improved version or a counter-weapon would be in the market in a year or two.

9. Science has saved many lives but one wonders what are these lives being saved for. Even as one wonders, the population keeps growing. We are told by Malthus that if we don't control population growth, we will outgrow our food supplies. Is this true? Not for the present at least. We now have more food than we can consume. But such is the economic system we have created, that those who most need the food are unable to pay for it. And they are unable to pay because those who can afford have destroyed their means of earning sufficiently to buy the food. The fall in commodity prices, restrictive trade practices by the rich, unfair competition by the technologically advanced, control of the means of transport, the sponge-like soaking of investment capital by the rich and a host of other factors have all combined to make the poor even poorer.

10. And so the lives that science saves and the consequent growth of population have merely compounded the problems that plague our planet. Telling people not to multiply is not the answer when the problem is in the economic injustice of a system that favours the rich and the powerful.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

11. The poor in this world have as much desire to breathe fresh unpolluted air as anyone else. They do want to live in an environment that is naturally clean and beautiful. Bhopal and Chernobyl horrifies them. But the problem is affordability.

12. If they cut down trees for firewood it is because they cannot afford other fuels. If they tear down their ancient forests it is because they need the money from the timber they sell. If they treat their country like a huge rubbish dump it is because they cannot afford expensive waste treatment and disposal.

13. It is right to want to preserve the pristine beauty of nature. But if the only way for the poor countries to earn money is to export logs at very low prices, can they be blamed for tearing down their forests? Pay good money for their timber and set up factories in their country to add value -- these will obviate the necessity for them to decimate their beautiful forests. Boycotting the use of timber and turning to substitutes like plastic will only

impoverish them and force them to chop down more trees to maintain what little they have been earning.

14. In Malaysia we are concerned about the environment too. But environment costs. There will be no pollution from palm oil factories if the factories can afford to pay for pollution-control equipments. But when palm oil prices are forced down by subsidised production of competing oils, environment and pollution become secondary to the more pressing needs of earning minimal profits.

15. Actually for most developing countries the problem of environment is academic. More important is development. Aid is important. Soft loans are welcome. But it is important not to take away with one hand what the other hand gives. Development aid will not help if the resultant development is negated by restrictive trade practices.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

16. No country wants to live on aid forever. Every country wants to earn money for itself. This it can do only if there are no trade restrictions. The incentives offered by developing countries for export manufacturing can only be worthwhile if the developed countries open their markets.

17. The trade wars of the rich should not result in blanket restrictions which affect developing countries. Restrictions should be discriminating in favour of developing countries. The rich should be allowed to avail themselves of the favoured treatment of developing countries if those countries themselves are unable to produce on their own. What matters is that the developing countries are able to reap some benefit which can contribute to their development.

18. What we are seeing today is a near total disregard for the poor. Seven rich countries meet and make decisions in their favour without any regard for the rest of the world. Thus to solve their trade imbalances they decided to revalue the Yen and Deutschmark and undervalue the American dollar. For Malaysia, for example, this decision has pushed up her Yen loan by 70% while reducing her earnings from petroleum exports. And very much the same thing has happened to other developing countries.

19. This is what happens when the rich become inward looking. Multilateralism is left battered, condemned to a slow death through fund deprivation. And the poor pays the price even as it gets poorer.

20. We have yet to learn to accept the fact that we are interdependent. There are some who think that they can be rich in the midst of poverty. History has taught us little. It is almost as if someone is again saying, "if you have no bread, why not eat cake instead."

21. Actually enriching the poor will enrich further the rich. After all we cannot escape from being the market for the rich. The more spending money we have the more things will we buy from the rich.

Your Excellencies,

22. It is in this context that we see the role of the Interaction Council. You may no longer be wielding power. But you do have influence. You are the conscience of the world. We welcome you here in Malaysia because we think the world needs its conscience now more than ever.

23. The greatest achievement of the post-war years is the liberation of so many colonial territories. How tragic it would be if the good work done by far-sighted leaders of those years are negated by a slide towards a new and no less debilitating form of imperialism. We do not like to talk of neo-colonialism. A lot of work has gone into discrediting the word. But neo-colonialism does exist. The term is not important but the fact is.

24. A few people, able and famous though they may be, cannot resolve all the problems that beset our planet today. But if you can manage to prick the conscience of the powers that be, that would have done the world and the cause of the poor nations in particular a great service indeed.

25. I am not a member of your organisation and I hope that the next few days would not qualify me to be a member of your organisation. Nevertheless, I would like to thank Your Excellencies for this opportunity to share my thoughts with you. I wish you every success in your deliberations and I hope you have a pleasant stay in this country.  
Thank you.