

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

EVENT: THE OPENING OF THE SECOND CONFERENCE OF ASEAN MINISTERS
RESPONSIBLE FOR INFORMATION

VENUE: SHANGRI-LA HOTEL, KUALA LUMPUR

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TIME:

Your Excellencies,
ASEAN Ministers responsible for Information;
Distinguished Delegates;
Honoured Guests;
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed a pleasure and privilege for me to address this distinguished gathering of the ASEAN Ministers responsible for Information. I am delighted to be present here this morning, especially to meet with leaders of the communication and information sector of ASEAN, and to officially open the Second Conference of ASEAN Ministers responsible for Information.

2. Events appear to be moving very fast these days in all parts of the world -- in Eastern Europe, in the Americas, in Africa and in Asia and, of course, in our own neighbourhood. These events will invariably affect the course of history -- for better or for worse. With the advances in all fields of communication the world has now become a global village and consequently thoughts or words or deeds reach the ears and even the eyes of everyone as frequently as they happen. We were able to sit in our houses and watch modern warfare being conducted on a real time basis. And countries can no longer shield their people from the happenings in other parts of the world. One of the most astounding results was the exposure of the failure of the communist ideology which led to it being abandoned in Russia and Eastern Europe.

3. There can be no doubt that the advances in communication technology have been largely beneficial to the human race. Their scope of awareness of the world they live in has been vastly enlarged. Far away places with strange sounding names seem no longer far or strange. Knowledge which had taken a whole lifetime to acquire in the past can now be learnt in an hour. There is a great deal more transparency in the affairs of man and of nations. Distance no longer separate, for the pressing of a few buttons will bring people within talking distance of each other.

4. Along with all these advances there is an explosion in the media industry, particularly the electronic media. The volume of information that is disseminated cannot be coped by any individual or society or nation. There are far too

much news that are fit to print or to broadcast. Accordingly news must be chopped into digestible bits, interpreted, vetted, censored, analysed, and underlined by people in the information business, whether Governmental or non-Governmental.

5. What these people are doing are no doubt essential. Without proper presentation, news would be confusing and indigestible. Some people must therefore condense and vet what the people should read and what they should not. And these people, whether they be from the Government or from the non-Government organisations, must acquire a considerable degree of power. And power, they say, corrupts.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

6. Freedom of the press is now accepted as an essential part of democracy. Quite rightly the dissemination of news by the press should not be suppressed. Governments have been able to subjugate their people by denying news. To allow Governments to control the press is synonymous with totalitarian rule. Any Government which interferes with the dissemination of news must therefore be regarded as undemocratic, a heretic in a world that now unanimously accepts democracy as an article of faith.

7. Knowing how powerful is the influence of information on the mind and action of people, and knowing also that it is impossible to distribute all the news as they happen and equally impossible for people to absorb all the news that is distributed, it is inevitable that the people involved in the information industry should select some happenings to report and to exclude the others.

8. In addition, it has now been accepted that the presentation of the news is also the right of those in the non-Governmental information industry. Now we know that the narration of history by different people and different countries differ greatly. In history it is always the other country which is wrong. One's own country is always right. And so whole generations grow up to hate and despise certain countries because of what their history books narrate. The same can happen in daily reporting by the press. A distorted view of events can always be spread because the people in the press, like the national historians, have certain views.

9. But, of late, it has even been accepted that lies can be fabricated in the name of freedom of the press. With the increasingly powerful weapons at the disposal of the press, it is entirely possible for the press not only to create totally erroneous views and opinions, but actually to undermine the stability and even the economy of countries. And events have shown that the guardians and practitioners of press freedom are not averse to using this unlimited license. New and more telling ways are continuously being invented so that lies can be accepted as the truth.

10. During the last World War, Dr. Goebbels of Nazi Germany perfected the art of the half-truth as a means to consolidate the support of the German people, first for the Nazi Party and then for the territorial ambition of Germany. Today, we wonder how the highly cultured and humane Germans could perpetrate the horrors of Belsen and Auschwitz, gassing and killing Jews and then glorying in their brutality. The answer lies in the effectiveness of Dr. Goebbels propaganda machine. Even the most gentle Germans can be made into a beast if fed the kind of selected information that was cooked up by Dr. Goebbels propaganda machine.

11. We do not have a Dr. Goebbels anywhere now. But when the world community accepts that press freedom confers the right to fabricate and tell lies, then we are condoning at least a part of the practices of Dr. Goebbels. The result may not be the brutes who terrorised Nazi Germany but certainly there would be people sufficiently prejudiced as not to be able to see anything right about others.

12. Another effect of a shrinking world and instant news is the evolution of a world press. Language is a very important factor in the world press. Obviously a newspaper circulated worldwide, say in the Mongolian language, if the Mongolian people have the kind of money to do this, is not going to have much impact on public opinion in the world. To be effective, the language must be one that is understood by the most number of people in the world. And the language is English, the national tongue of some of the most populous and richest countries in the world. It is not surprising therefore that the English speaking nations largely control the world press. The non-English speaking nations which are also poor cannot have access to the world press to give their views or versions of whatever news are reported about them.

13. As a consequence, the poor non-English speaking nations feel naked and defenceless. If freedom of the press is to be meaningful, then everyone should be able to present his side of the story. What we are seeing is a one-sided exercise of that freedom. Those who have no access to the world press have no freedom.

14. We talk so much about human-rights, justice and fair-play, etc. The question that must be asked is whether there is justice and fair-play when only certain people can influence the minds of the world community, and whether human rights is not denied when whole nations are deprived of their right of expression and their freedom to air their views. Does press freedom refer only to the freedom of those who control the press in a country and not to the freedom of the people to air their views in the press? Does freedom of the press exist when only certain nations can air their versions of the truth and others may not?

15. Some years ago there was an attempt by poor countries to reform the international information order. Normally there is sympathy for the poor, but there was no sympathy shown to the poor nations' attempt to gain access to the international media and to fair reporting. One of the biggest United Nations Agencies was threatened with a cut-off in its finances if it entertains the pleas of the poor nations. And so with unseemly haste the new information order was jettisoned. The right to fabricate, to tell lies and to do selective and slanted reporting about poor nations remains.

Ladies and gentlemen,

16. The ASEAN countries are a group of developing nations anxious to make as rapid a progress as possible towards a developed stage. Although by comparison the ASEAN countries have done quite well, as developing countries they have all the weaknesses associated with such a status. To develop they will need as little hindrance as possible.

17. One of the most important preconditions for them is political stability. This precondition can only be achieved if the people are well-informed, responsible, and aware of the results of their own action.

18. Democracy confers on the people rights and freedom of action. But rights and freedom are not free-standing entities. They must be accompanied by a sense of responsibility.

19. For a democracy to succeed the people must therefore be appreciative not only of their rights but also their responsibilities. This can only come about through a process of formal and informal education regarding democracy, which we all know is an alien concept.

20. It is in the area of informal education that information ministries, agencies and departments of Governments have to play a big role. It is the duty of Government to give some guidance without converting a democracy into a guided democracy. The line between merely guiding and being a guided democracy is difficult to draw. Too little guidance may result in irresponsibility, too much may negate democracy.

21. Yet the people must know that it is in their interest to be responsible in the exercise of democratic freedom. They must know that there is no monopoly by anyone in the definition and exercise of democracy. They must know that democracy is meant to serve the people. The exercise of democratic rights to the point where the people continuously suffer instability, insecurity and low or negative economic growth would seem to negate the objectives of being democratic. Yet, in most instances, it is not democracy which is at fault but the failure to understand it or worse still, the manipulation of democracy by self-serving people.

22. People who understand the way democracy works and its limitations will be able to derive the maximum benefit from the system. The mindless acceptance of someone else's interpretation of democracy and an unquestioning submission to certain practices, as for example the right to fabricate and tell lies, will undermine not only the fledgling democracies but the democratic system as well. This, the countries of ASEAN can ill-afford.

23. Governments have a duty not only to protect democracy and freedom, but also to bring about social and economic well-being for the citizens. While Governments should not suppress the truth; while there should be press freedom and a free flow of information, Governments would be failing in their duty if they allow abuse of press freedom to the extent that lies can be spread and the stability and economic well-being of the people undermined.

Ladies and gentlemen,

24. The ASEAN Ministers responsible for Information face a daunting task. They have to be responsible for both the free flow of information as well as ensure the stability of their countries. There will be many occasions when the two seem incompatible, when their responsibility for the development of their countries seem to run counter to their faith in the freedom of democracy. It is not easy for example to ban a newspaper or expel a journalist. You don't do such things without getting a bashing from the Fourth Estate and those who consider themselves holier than us.

25. Tolerance must therefore be stretched to the maximum. But no tolerance is necessary when there is evidence of deliberate lies which undermine the nation.

26. Your meeting will enable you to exchange experiences and discuss how best the media can be used for the good of your respective countries. It is hoped that the ASEAN Ministers responsible for Information will be able to cooperate well. It is important to remember that instability of one ASEAN country will affect the stability of the others and the region.

27. I hope you will have a good meeting. I now have much pleasure to declare open the Second Conference of ASEAN Ministers responsible for Information.