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**SPEECH BY YANG AMAT BERBAHAGIA
DATIN SERI DR. SITI HASMAH BT HAJI MOHD. ALI
PRESIDENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL STEERING COMMITTEE
ON THE ECONOMIC ADVANCEMENT OF RURAL WOMEN (ISC)
AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE 3RD ISC MEETING
AT THE PALACE OF GOLDEN HORSES,
SG. BESI, KUALA LUMPUR
ON THURSDAY, 22 OCTOBER 1998
AT 9.00 A.M.**

It is indeed a great honour for me to extend to each and every one of you a very warm welcome to the 3rd Meeting of the International Steering Committee on the Economic Advancement of Rural Women. I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere appreciation to Her Majesty Queen Fabiola of Belgium, the Patron of ISC, for her gracious presence at this meeting. On behalf of the members of ISC, I would like to thank Her Majesty for her unwavering support over the past few years, especially over the last two years of my presidency. Her Majesty's selfless devotion and continuous commitment, working for the improvement of the living conditions of the poor women, has given us the encouragement and motivation to make the ISC a sustainable and successful organisation.

2. May I also take this opportunity to extend my warm welcome to Her Excellency, Mrs. Elisabeth Diouf, the First Lady of Senegal who has been actively involved in advocating on behalf of rural women since the preparation of the Geneva Summit. Her Excellency is one of the core group of initiators representing Francophone Africa. To our new member, Her Excellency Justice Fati Abu Bakar, the First Lady of Nigeria, ISC welcomes you and look forward to working together for the advancement of rural women. Last but not least, I wish to extend a very special thanks to the Honourable Dato Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the Prime Minister of Malaysia for his presence and willingness to officially open this meeting.

3. Today marks another historical milestone in the lives of the poor rural women as we assemble for the third time to deliberate on our concern for the cause of poor women all over the world. Since the Geneva Summit in 1992, followed by the formation of ISC and the convening of the 1st ISC Meeting in Brussels, Belgium in 1994, the members of ISC has taken on the roles

as strong advocates for measures to uplift the dismal living conditions of rural women, in line with the objectives of Geneva Declaration for the Advancement of Rural Women. As we all know rural women suffer from a wide range of problems related to policy-making, legislative implementation and protection, political participation at community and national levels, and gender-equitable access to credit, land, technology, health and other basic social services. The ISC has the earnest desire to put forward realistic and viable goals for the betterment of women all over the world. This can be done by empowering rural women to enable them to actively participate in all spheres of life within the basic principles set forth in the Geneva Declaration.

4. Members of ISC believe that womens' access to education, nutrition, health care, land and credit are very important as these would determine whether women have achieved their full potential as a productive, healthy and secured citizen.

5. Widespread economic crisis as well as political instability in some regions are responsible for the failures of some development efforts in many countries and have resulted in high levels of poverty. In situations where the economic crisis is very severe, cutbacks on essential areas of public expenditures, particularly social expenditures, will lead to the deterioration in the living standards of the weaker and vulnerable segments of society, in particular women and children.

6. We, therefore, need to take appropriate steps to face up to the menace of poverty. We need to develop the potentials of women, who represent half of the human resource of the world. This involves developing skills, providing opportunities, and making work environment safer and conducive for women to participate actively in the process of economic and social development.

7. In 1996, when we met in Amman, Jordan, we deliberated on how ISC members could effectively plan their roles in mobilising resources for the advancement of rural women. The Amman Meeting focused on the quality of life, micro-credit, and household food-security - the positive and negative impact of these issues which transcends the woman herself, and eventually affects the fate of the entire communities. A Plan of Action for the years 1996-1998 was adopted to be implemented at the national, regional and international level.

8. Today in Kuala Lumpur, I feel very proud to have the honour of hosting the 3rd ISC meeting. In this meeting, we will be presenting the progress of the activities as outlined in the Plan of Action. The theme chosen for this meeting is "Poverty Amongst Rural Women, Families and Communities". This theme is chosen based on the fact that it is a critical issue within the context of rural women and should be addressed and acted upon effectively. We will also be discussing four other pressing issues affecting the economic situation of rural women. They are:-

- (i) Development and Access to suitable Technology;
- (ii) Managing and Conserving the Environment;
- (iii) Importance of Micro and Small Scale Enterprises for Rural Women, Their Families and Communities; and
- (iv) Mobilising Women's Groups for Rural Development Through Smart Partnership between GOs, NGOs and the Private Sectors.

9. In addition to the meeting proper, we have prepared a special field visit to the District of Sepang, where we will have the opportunity to see programmes on rural women's involvement in rural development in Malaysia. In recognition of their critical contribution to development, we take the opportunity to join in the celebration of the "World Rural Women's Day" and the "World Food Day" which falls on 15 October, and 16-18 October, 1998 respectively. The theme of the "World Food Day" for this year is "Women Feed the World". A few rural women who have shown outstanding performance in different areas of development will be awarded certificates of achievement.

10. As President of the ISC, I sincerely hope that this meeting will stimulate further discourse on women's issues, particularly those that concern the well-being and dignity of rural women. I have every confidence that this meeting will reach a consensus on strategic actions to be undertaken by members of the ISC for the betterment of rural women the world over.