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**SPEECH BY
HER EXCELLENCY DR. SITI HASMAH BINTI MOHD ALI
FIRST LADY OF MALAYSIA
AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE 4TH SESSION OF
THE ISC ON THE ECONOMIC ADVANCEMENT
OF RURAL WOMEN IN DAKAR, SENEGAL
ON 22ND - 24TH NOVEMBER 2000**

I would like to thank the organising committee for giving me this honour to say a few words on this auspicious occasion. We are indeed very happy to be here to express our gratitude to the Government and the people of Senegal for their warm welcome and hospitality accorded to us all. Dakar is the fourth city to host the ISC and the first to do so in the African Continent. The concept of choosing the presidency by region enables members of the ISC to enrich ourselves with deeper knowledge and understanding of the host countries, the issues and problems faced by rural women and the initiatives taken by national Governments to address such problems.

2. The ISC have come a long way through the European, West Asian and the Asia-Pacific regions since 1992. I am confident that my colleagues have gained as much as I have, and have become as committed to enhance our roles as advocates to improve the living conditions of the poorest of the poor, the rural and island women and their families. It is our responsibility as First Ladies to mobilise the political will of national Governments and to implement gender sensitive policies and plans of action, as outlined in the Geneva Declaration for the Economic Advancement of Rural Women (1992), the Beijing Plans of Action (1995) and other conventions that our Governments have become signatories to, including the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

3. The main major challenge is still POVERTY, but related aspects of it and its causes, are yet to be continuously looked into seriously as more and more socio-economic and environmental situations increased the conditions of poverty.

4. In the Third ISC session in Kuala Lumpur in 1998, we recommended that the ISC advocate for the formulation of policies, programmes and resources for the development of suitable and appropriate technologies that are women and environment friendly. We also urged for smart partnership between Governments, Non-Government Organisations, and private sectors so that women's activities would be enhanced.

5. In the 2nd RSC-AP sessions in September 2000 again in Kuala Lumpur, the First Ladies resolved to advocate issues that dealt more on ownership of assets for rural women, equal access to credits, employment and education, information technology and extension services. We stressed on the inclusion of rural and island women as active participants at all stages and levels of the development process.

6. Two new topics were discussed, that RSC-AP recommends to be recognised at the highest level as major issues;

- 1) The issue of the Killer Diseases, particularly HIV/AIDS and its impact on the population. "The Missing Generation" i.e. mothers with AIDS delivering positive HIV babies and dying soon after, are increasing.
- 2) The issue of the Impact of War and Conflict on Women and Children as one of the major causes of poverty. The victims are usually the Women, Children and the Aged.

7. While trying not to be so discouraged on this auspicious occasion I feel it is my duty to express the many more responsibilities that the ISC and RSC play in helping women, in particular the rural and marginalised women everywhere. We are now in the I.T. era. Governments must ensure that the rural women will not be forgotten in their programmes to make their population computer literate. I am very glad that this topic is included for a Workshop discussion. The narrowing of the digital divide between urban and rural, between men and women are needed through concrete strategies and we need the utmost co-operation and understanding from the men to achieve this.

8. I know that you have just returned from a major and important OIC Meeting in Duha, Qatar. I was told that there was only ONE woman head of delegation from Albania. Unfortunately, there was no topic concerning women in the Agenda nor in the Declaration thereafter. This is sad because, as you will notice, Sir, that in this august assembly, there are women and men who will discuss together real issues pertaining to women. Your gracious presence here this morning in this Opening Session regarding Rural Women is an encouragement and hope that you will give your continuous full support to us and our efforts in every forum as the end result will surely benefit the rural women, the children, our nations and Governments.

9. The First Lady of Senegal Mrs Wade has organised this ISC Session for us women from far and near. We congratulate you, Mr President, and your First Lady for making this possible.

10. May the Almighty give us Guidance and Direction to attain our goals and for Peace and Harmony for all of us, insya-Allah.

11. Thank you. Wassalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh.

Prime Minister's Office
Putrajaya