

**By : DATUK SERI SYED HAMID ALBAR**  
**Venue : SINGAPORE**  
**Date : 23 JULY 1999**  
**Title : 32ND ASEAN MINISTERIAL MEETING**

Mr. Chairman,  
Your Royal Highness,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Malaysian Delegation, I join my ASEAN colleagues in expressing our appreciation to His Excellency Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong for his thought provoking Opening Address. I wish to congratulate His Excellency Professor Jayakumar on his election as the Chairman of the 32nd ASEAN Ministerial Meeting. I am confident that under his able chairmanship, we can look forward to very productive deliberations in the days ahead. My Delegation and I wish to express our appreciation to the Government of Singapore for the excellent arrangements made and the kind generosity extended. I congratulate the Foreign Minister of Thailand, Excellency Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, on his election as Vice Chairman of our Meeting and I wish to warmly welcome the Special Envoy of Papua New Guinea as Observer at our Meeting.

2. Today's Meeting will definitely go down into the records as another historic milestone in the annals of the ASEAN Ministerial Meetings. Cambodia's inaugural participation as a full member of ASEAN is the culmination of years of effort to realize the vision of our Founding Fathers of forging one Southeast Asia, united in its pursuit of cooperation and development, and securing for the people of Southeast Asia the blessings of peace, freedom and prosperity. It now falls upon all of us to translate the ASEAN Vision 2020, adopted in Kuala Lumpur in 1997, into tangible benefits for the region.

3. Coming as it does in the wake of some of the most severe economic threats to the wellbeing of our region, ASEAN TEN has generated questions and doubts over our ability to cope with the multifaceted challenges confronting the Organization and the region at this critical juncture of our development. Just a couple of years or so ago, our countries were hailed as the most dynamic and our regional organization the most successful in the developing world. I suppose this change of perception could be expected, coming fast on the heels of the reversal of our economic fortunes. But we are definitely rebounding.

4. Looking at the recent past, the financial crisis which had overwhelmed our economies and unsettled the social and political fabric of our societies, showed that ASEAN countries were as yet unprepared for the full impact of the forces of globalization and less than ready to enter the era of digital technology. Against this backdrop, even bilateral relations between member states came under stress.

5. Views have been expressed that ASEAN TEN with its diversity will come under further divisive stress. The differences in historical experiences, political cultures, levels of development and strategic perceptions have been used as the reasons. We have been told that ASEAN will face even greater difficulty in maintaining cohesion and managing consensus. To sum up, it is contended that these will contribute to enfeeble ASEAN.

6. Malaysia does not underestimate the challenges or the necessity to address them effectively. At the same time, however, Malaysia wishes to underline the pluses and the opportunities that come with ASEAN TEN.

7. The Founding Fathers brought ASEAN into being because they shared the conviction that peace, freedom, social justice and economic wellbeing are best attained by fostering good understanding, good neighborliness and meaningful cooperation amongst the countries in our region. Southeast Asia is a natural geographical region. ASEAN TEN is the logical response to the maturing of the political and strategic processes in the ASEAN sphere.

8. As a political grouping, ASEAN had prospered over the years because its members adhered closely to the spirit and codes in the conduct of our relations with each other. Among the most fundamental are the principles of non-interference in the internal affairs of one another, mutual respect and equality. We have also evolved our own unique way of conducting business in the group, namely through consultation and consensus.

9. Cooperating together on that basis, we have succeeded in establishing a peaceful environment in Southeast Asia and overcome decades of divisiveness, tension and turmoil. We have made good use of the peaceful environment to focus on nation-building and economic development. We have also successfully undertaken various regional strategic initiatives, such as the establishment of the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone and the convening of the ASEAN Regional Forum. We are addressing transnational issues affecting our region. Our collective voice has given us a standing and role in international affairs. Singly, we would not have attained the same stature or clout. This was how the ASEAN candidate finally triumphed and obtained endorsement to be the Director-General of the World Trade Organization for the second term. I take this opportunity to congratulate the Thai government and Dr. Supachai in particular.

10. In response to the recent economic crisis, we have also hastened the pace of our economic cooperation activities. We are glad to see our newer members have not slowed down the pace of these activities. We have accommodated the new members by adopting a multi-speed timetable as deadlines for implementation. We have also cooperated more closely on financial matters. Indeed, through our national and regional efforts, we are set on the road to economic recovery. Our only remaining task is to ensure that all of us do stay the course.

11. Southeast Asia is now united in pursuing its 2020 target, which we have voluntarily committed ourselves to, as we face the challenges of the next millenium. We must seize this unique opportunity. In a world that is so interdependent and interconnected, the Southeast Asian region cannot and must not become divided again. Our strength lies in enhancing our regional cohesion by creating a true community of Southeast Asian nations. In joining ASEAN, the newer members are now exposed to and must participate fully in ASEAN activities. They may need to undertake reforms where necessary, adjusting and harmonizing their regulations in line with their commitments under the various ASEAN agreements.

12. It is clear that ASEAN TEN must continue to exert even greater efforts to develop consensus and maintain cohesion. It must take into account formidable external factors. In addressing these challenges, Malaysia believes that ASEAN would do well to draw on the thirty-two years of its experience and accumulated collective wisdom. We cannot succeed if we ignore the experience and history of our country or organization.

13. Malaysia wishes to underscore the need for ASEAN to have faith in itself and to develop approaches that best suit the situation of this region. As we have learnt from the lessons of the financial crisis, depending on the circumstances and constraints, there can be different options to handle every problem. No single party should claim to have a monopoly on the solutions or try to impose its own on others.

14. The weakening of our economies had undermined the potentials of member countries and the image of ASEAN as an organization. There are those that have become even more emboldened, subjecting us to selective criticism and vilification. It has also led to calls for ASEAN to discard its modus operandi. Let us pause and carefully think through the options available to us. We should not accept those which are alien to our national psyche and hurtful to our national objectives. Let us adopt only those that will bring real benefits, not those that are merely virtual in nature.

15. This is the same approach we should adopt in handling regional problems which affect us directly, such as the issue of peace and security in the South China Sea. We should resolve this regional issue by ourselves, either bilaterally or with others in the region, who are directly concerned. Freedom of navigation, which is of interest also to those outside the region, has never, at any point in time, being threatened. We should proceed to draw up a regional code of conduct as guidelines in the South China Sea among the parties concerned, in accordance with the Hanoi Plan of Action to ensure peace and stability that we have enjoyed.

16. Malaysia has confidence that ASEAN will weather whatever difficulties the organization might now have, and emerge even stronger. Malaysia maintains that the way forward for ASEAN is to focus on the basics, namely to develop national resilience, promote economic growth and enhance regional cooperation. Equally important, we should consistently strengthen positive inter-state relations among ourselves. We should also continue to intensify cooperation with other countries, in particular, with ASEAN's neighbors in Northeast Asia, namely China, Japan and the Republic of Korea as the wellbeing of our peoples can be affected by their policies

and action. For instance, the reform of the international financial architecture would require support from all of them.

17. The ASEAN Leaders - in adopting the Hanoi Declaration, the Hanoi Plan of Action and the Statement on Bold Measures as well as in their discussions during the ASEAN+3 Summit Meeting in December 1998 - had pointed the direction in which Vision 2020 should move ahead. While I look forward to discussing the future of ASEAN at our Retreat, we should be mindful of the broad parameters already established by our Leaders.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.