

By : DATUK SERI SYED HAMID ALBAR
Venue : SANTIAGO
Date : 29 MARCH 2001
**Title : FIRST MINISTERIAL MEETING OF
THE FORUM FOR EAST ASIA – LATIN AMERICA COOPERATION**

1. Madame Chairperson, we are here to chart a new course in relations between East Asia and Latin America. Let me say at the outset that we are attending this forum with an open mind, desirous of breaking down geographical barriers. But more importantly we come with no other agenda except to build genuine structures of cooperation. Our participation here as a fitting compliment to the work of our embassies in this region in promoting closer relations.

2. Madam Chairperson, we cannot avoid at looking at ourselves as countries and regions – as reflected in the forum for East Asia and Latin America Cooperation. However, we do not intend to be constrained by it. It is in the dynamics of cooperation that we have to approach our visions and objectives from a global perspective --operating outside our own national borders with the least impediments or obstacles possible, to enhance cooperation in a multiplicity of areas that can bring about mutual benefits within and outside the region. We have to deal with the new realities of a borderless world and globalization. We have to manage the challenges and opportunities in order to gain from them.

3. We should resist the temptation to undertake ambitious projects and instead concentrate on practical ones that can be quickly implemented which can yield tangible results to be sustainable.

4. It is in this context, I would like to offer my comments on enhancing relations between East Asian and Latin America.

5. Firstly, to enhance awareness between our two regions. We have of course been talking about this in other forums for many years but it still remains a somewhat nebulous idea. Distance, language and differing regional focuses are all examples of some of the barriers that have kept us apart. I see that there are several projects have already been put forward that call for exchanging journalists, academicians, scientists and cultural groups. These projects, if effectively implemented and supported by all of us can be major steps forward.

6. At present, there are very few air bridges between East Asia and Latin America. The promotion of people-to-people contact and economic and trade interchange. We must take steps to break down this distance barrier by facilitating travel and transport between our regions. Trade, economic cooperation and people to people contact will increase with better air and maritime transport.

7. Secondly, my impression is that East Asia has been much more aggressive in promoting trade and economic cooperation with Latin America. I hope that this forum would encourage Latin America countries to increase their efforts to promote their exports in Asia and go all out in attracting Asian capital to this region. It is said that it takes two to tango.

8. In this regard I am inclined to suggest that trade promotion organizations from Forum member countries should undertake to assist one another in trade promotional activities in their respective countries. In addition we should make every effort to encourage and facilitate greater use of e-commerce to further inter-regional trade and investment.

9. While the subject of trade let me comment briefly on the launching of the new WTO round of negotiations which some of my colleagues here have already touched upon. Much pressure is now being exerted on WTO member countries to agree to the immediate launching of the next round. What is important is to do develop a consensus on a balanced and manageable agenda that takes into account the concerns and interests of all WTO members, particularly from the developing countries. Extraneous issues should not be included. The educative process, which is ongoing in the WTO, should continue because issues such as investment, competition, transparency in government procurement and trade facilitation have not been fully discussed. It is I think, premature to consider new issues while existing issues of concern remain unattended to.

10. Thirdly, we all recognize the importance of information technology in today's globalized world. Many countries in our respective regions have already begun to evolve information technology centers. A sharing of experience to overcome the digital divide would certainly be beneficial. Malaysia for one would be willing to initiate a program to promote the greater use of information technology in development. In addition, we would also be willing to consider offering places to students from Latin America at the Multimedia University of Malaysia.

11. Fourthly, I think it would be useful to encourage student exchanges and help build up a new generation of young people who are more familiar with Asia and Latin America. On this matter, Malaysia would be willing to consider offering scholarships to students from Latin America to pursue appropriate courses in institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. I will endeavour to circulate in the next few weeks' further information on these courses.

12. In conclusion, let me say that there is much to be gained from closer cooperation within the Forum but we – both individually and collectively – need to seize the many opportunities that now exist and move forward for the common good of our peoples.

Thank you.