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Mr. Co Chairs,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. I wish to extend my appreciation to the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia and Australia for this initiative in convening a Regional Ministerial Meeting on Counter-Terrorism.

2. Our presence here demonstrates anew our political will and commitment to strengthen regional efforts in combating terrorism. Convening this meeting in Bali is also of special significance in the light of the Bali bombing in 2002.

3. International terrorism will remain a common threat confronting us unless we adopt a comprehensive approach in confronting the scourge. It is not sufficient for us only to focus on legislative, financial and enforcement measures to prevent its physical manifestations. Equally important, we have to tackle the underlying causes and the environment that breeds terrorism.

4. Terrorism is, of course, not a new phenomenon in Southeast Asia. Militant groups espousing various causes, be it overthrowing the prevailing government of the day or pursuing separatist agenda and resorting to terrorism or insurgency in the process, have existed for more than half a century.

5. They included the Aceh rebellion in Indonesia, the communist insurgency in Malaysia, insurgencies by various groups in Myanmar, guerilla activities of the New People's Army and the Moro rebellion in the Philippines, as well as the Patani rebellion in South Thailand. Some in the region have dealt successfully with these threats. For others, such threats have endured, in varying degree, through the years.

6. In Malaysia's case, our multifaceted approach employing not only administrative, legislative and enforcement measures but also an unrelenting campaign in winning the hearts and minds of those who felt marginalized, had enabled us to successfully put an end to the communist insurgency.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

7. Thus prior to September 11, acts of terrorism in the Southeast Asian region could be said to be largely local in nature. The word "terrorists" was seldom used to describe these actions. Groups that carried out these activities were essentially homegrown extremists or militants. Basically they existed independently, without cooperative links with each other or being part of an international or regional terrorist network. And the factors motivating them were largely domestic in nature.

8. However in the mid eighties, the region saw the emergence of religious-inspired militant or extremist groups whose major aim is to oust the government of the day by force, under the pretext of establishing an "Islamic" government.

9. Nevertheless, it was only after September 11 that the full extent of this regional threat became known. This threat was exposed after counter terrorism actions taken by authorities revealed the existence of militants, operating in loose association with each other. Arrest of terrorist suspects further revealed the operation of a clandestine regional terrorist network, known as the Jemaah Islamiah (JI).

10. We now know that the ultimate objective of the JI, which was established by Abdullah Sungkar and has a hierarchical setup, aimed at overthrowing by force the legitimate governments of several Southeast Asian countries and later, to unite to form a pan-Islamic Southeast Asia, encompassing part of Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei and southern Philippines. While JI is not part of the international Al-Qaeda network, the loose linkages established between certain leaders of the two groupings led to arrangements for mutual benefit.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

11. In the light of the diversity of the region and thus of the approaches in tackling this challenge, the current status of the terrorist threat in the affected countries is not uniform. Nonetheless, counter-terrorism efforts by regional countries have significantly crippled the operation of the JI network. This has disrupted JI plans to conduct major attacks against governments and Western targets in the region as well as the loose linkages JI has with Al-Qaeda.

12. In so far as JI activities in Malaysia are concerned, action which began as early as December 2001 and which saw the arrest of many of its active members, and the continuing investigation and surveillance have severely disrupted the network. However, to neutralize the group, remaining members have to be apprehended. Malaysia will certainly exert all efforts to keep the movement in check and to prevent its revival.

13. Singapore's operation too has severely disrupted the JI network, through investigations and arrests. In the light of the measures undertaken, it may be

difficult for JI to mount large-scale attack in the city state but it is clear that the country remains vigilant.

14. Other regional countries, through their operations, have also made important contributions in disrupting JI plans and operations. The arrests and prosecution by Indonesia of some of those involved in the Bali and Marriot bombings have helped to uncover JI network in the region and other terrorist incidents in Indonesia since 2000.

15. The arrest of Fathur Rohman Al-Ghozi in January 2003 by the Philippines had uncovered JI plans in the Philippines while the Thai operation, particularly in the arrest of Hambali in August 2003, had dealt a serious blow to JI plans and operations as well as severed another point of contact between JI and Al-Qaeda in the region.

16. Governments of affected countries in the region have thus taken concerted action to combat the terrorist threat. As a result, JI operations have suffered setbacks. However, we must not be complacent as the regional terrorist network could still pose a threat. The capacity of JI in launching attacks through a few of its committed operatives that have escaped arrest cannot be ruled out, including the possibility of JI resorting to attacking 'soft targets'. We have to remain vigilant as JI operatives may well change its modus operandi to overcome measures undertaken by Governments.

17. Terrorism's causes, ladies and gentlemen, are complex and varied. What causes individuals to sacrifice their lives? Is it poverty, oppression, injustice, alienation, ideology or manipulation? While it is difficult to pinpoint precisely the underlying causes of terrorism, an understanding of the agenda of the groupings and the motivation of participants and sympathizers should provide us with a better appreciation of the root causes. It is only then that a viable multifaceted counter-terrorist strategy could be developed that deal with the menace in an effective and durable manner.

18. Rebellions by militant groups in the region which predate September 11 could perhaps be attributed to political and socio-economic grievances as well as a sense of marginalization. The long term solution would require countries involved to address these fundamental concerns apart from taking enforcement and other measures.

19. As far as JI is concerned, the picture is more complex. The emergence in the region of radical groups using Islam as a rallying force could be attributed to various factors – religious resurgence, social alienation, exposure to external developments, including in West Asia and Afghanistan, and the deep sense of anger and frustration directed particularly at the US and Israel over the manner Muslim communities and countries have been treated so unjustly, and with impunity. This notwithstanding Islam as a religion should not be held accountable because of the misguided action of a few.

20. JI leaders, including its preachers and religious teachers, are committed to propagating the Salafi Jihadiah ideology. They also seem to share the views of Al-Qaeda vis-à-vis the struggle against US and Jews. Their perception of the US and its actions, especially with regard to Muslim, Muslim countries and on the Palestinian issue, are similar.

21. Questioning of JI suspects suggested that JI preachers and religious teachers had made use of their privately held religious classes to influence their students and recruit those who responded positively to their ideas. Thus some have argued that those recruited commit violence as a result of manipulative influences.

22. I believe that it is against this background that some viewed the campaign against terrorism as ultimately a campaign that must be waged between moderate and extremist Muslims. While it is certainly true that extremist Muslims have indeed misinterpreted Islam and hijacked the religion for their own purposes, it is unacceptable to view the fight against terrorism in this light. Terrorism is not an internal struggle among practitioners of Islam but a struggle that has many dimensions.

23. First, it must be emphasized that, even in this region, terrorist attacks have been perpetrated by diverse groups with varied agenda and not only by those who have hijacked the Islamic faith. Suicide bombings for instance did not originate in the Muslim world.

24. Secondly, such perception ignores completely the source of rage in the Muslim world which has given rise to militancy among some. Foremost is the unending oppression of Palestinians by policies which seems to be tolerated if not supported by those that matters.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

25. It must be noted that there are people, who though not directly affected by unjust and inhuman treatment themselves, could still identify personally and intensely with the sufferings and humiliation inflicted with impunity on the Palestinians in their just and legitimate struggle against foreign occupation. Further, current communication systems and technology have effectively disseminated information and transmitted vivid images of unparallel and disproportionate use of force by Israel against defenseless and innocent Palestinian civilians. This could make them highly susceptible, indeed, willing to undertake causes that express support for those persecuted and victimized as well as to overcome the sense of powerless in making any difference to the injustices that prevailed in the world.

26. Of course action must be taken to guard against the spread of religious extremist and fanaticism, by promoting tolerance among diverse communities and religions, emphasizing moderation and propagating the true teachings of all religions, including Islam. However, decisive and urgent action to resolve the long-standing Palestinian-Israeli conflict is also imperative.

27. At the same time, it is important that efforts in combating terrorism must not result in the profiling and targeting of particular communities and countries as this would undermine global effort. In this respect, the international community must enhance dialogue and cooperation among different religions and cultures.

28. Some have argued that poverty is not a direct cause of terrorism. Nevertheless, poverty creates the environment which breeds and nurtures sympathy for, and support of terrorist activities. In this respect, while national governments must pursue appropriate social-economic and development policies, the international community must seriously and urgently work towards the establishment of a more equitable international economic and financial system.

29. The challenges facing the international community in combating terrorism have never been more diverse and difficult than during this period. The singular counter-terrorism action by a single state is no longer valid. Enhanced cooperation among countries is imperative. Our response must be multi-pronged and multi-dimensional. These include national, regional and international efforts in identifying and addressing the root causes, undertaking strict and stern enforcement measures, undertaking psychological warfare programmes to counter the destructive influence of the extremists and terrorists as well as providing training and expertise to officers and institutions involved in counter-terrorism activities.

30. In line with our recognition that counter terrorism requires integrated efforts at the regional and international level, I would like to take this opportunity to draw your attention to the South East Asia Regional Centre for Counter Terrorism (SEARCCT), established in Malaysia in July 2003. This Centre would primarily focus on training and capacity building and not be involved in operations or serve as an intelligence agency. The activities of the Centre would focus primarily on key areas such as Pre-Terrorism Situation, Training for Trainers, Public Awareness and Education Programmes, Border and Security Control, and Post-Terrorism Situation and Management.

31. We have forwarded the training programmes to all interested countries and organizations. We are pleased to note that some of you have expressed keen interest to collaborate with SEARCCT in the programmes.

32. In August last year SEARCCT, in collaboration with the Central Bank of Malaysia and the US Financial Crimes Enforcement Network organized its first training programme on Basic Analysis and Suspicious Transaction Workshop in Kuala Lumpur. The 60 participants from ASEAN, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Macau and Timor-Leste that took part in the seminar had found this most useful.

33. For 2004, SEARCCT has so far lined up several programmes. Among these are training courses organized in collaboration with the US on The Interdiction of Terrorist Organizations and a Seminar on Disaster Scene Management as well as with the European Commission on Border Management and Terrorist Financing. We are confident that such training courses would enhance capacity building among countries in the region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

34. We believe that this Meeting would achieve its objectives in strengthening regional cooperation in combating terrorism. The participation of countries in this Meeting will foster a better understanding on the extent and complexities of the terrorism problem that we have before us all.

Thank you.