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Venue : PALACE OF THE GOLDEN HORSES, KUALA LUMPUR
Date : 21 – 23 JUNE 2004
Title : INTRODUCTORY REMARKS AT THE SECOND EAST ASIA CONGRESS

The Honourable Dato' Seri Abdullah Hj Ahmad Badawi
Prime Minister of Malaysia,

Tan Sri Dr Noordin Sopiee
Chairman of the East Asia Economic Centre
at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

May I begin by conveying my deep appreciation to Tan Sri Dr Noordin Sopiee, for requesting me to make this introductory remarks.

I would also like at the outset to welcome all of you to this important Congress, and to particularly acknowledge those who have traveled to Malaysia. I do hope that you will not only have a productive meeting but a pleasant visit to Malaysia as well.

This Second East Asia Congress is a follow up to the successful convening of the First East Asia Congress held in Kuala Lumpur in August last year. It is a 'Track Two' process involving scholars, private sector executives, government officials and others who are all committed towards advancing East Asia cooperation. East Asia, as embodied within the ASEAN+3 process, comprises of all ASEAN countries, China, Japan and the Republic of Korea. In 1997, during the Second ASEAN Informal Summit, here in Kuala Lumpur, the Heads of State/Government of China, Japan and Korea were invited to meet their ASEAN counterparts, thus launching what today is popularly referred to as the ASEAN+3 Summit.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As ASEAN countries continue to deepen intra ASEAN ties, ASEAN would also continue to enhance its external ties with all its Dialogue Partners, within which relations with the Plus Three would remain special. Indeed, developments since the 1997 ASEAN+3 Summit have been most encouraging in our common efforts to build an East Asian Community. Today ASEAN Plus Three cooperation covers a wide spectrum including in the areas of finance, economy, energy, transport, ICT, transnational crime, agriculture, environment, health, and culture. Through the relentless efforts and timely initiatives of all of us in East Asia, we have not only sustained but also accelerated the process towards even greater and closer East Asia Cooperation.

Last year was a milestone for East Asia. The outbreak of SARS, did not prevent East Asians from attending the First East Asia Congress, held in August 2003, under the aegis of ISIS Malaysia. In September, the inaugural meeting of the Network of East Asian Think Tanks or 'NEATT', for short, was held in Beijing with approximately 100 researchers in attendance. In December 2003, the first East Asian Forum was held in Seoul, a tripartite gathering of policymakers, academics and private sector executives. This, too, yielded a rich harvest of ideas, insights and perspectives towards promoting East Asian cooperation. Kuala Lumpur would host the 2nd EAF on 6 – 7 December 2004 while the 2nd NEATT would be held in Bangkok. I am highly optimistic that they too would be very well attended and productive, leading to clear and implementable guidelines and proposals that East Asian leaders would be able to use.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are honoured this morning to have the Prime Minister of Malaysia, the Honourable Datuk Seri Abdullah Hj Ahmad Badawi to give the Keynote Address. As all of you are aware, the Prime Minister's rich and vast experience includes his career at the Foreign Ministry where he served as Malaysia's Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1991 to January 1999. He therefore was personally involved in many initiatives to promote East Asian cooperation including in the implementation of Malaysia's Look East Policy. East Asia remains a subject which is close to his heart and mind. This was evident in his recent speech at the 10th International Nikkei Conference at Tokyo on 3rd June 2004. In sharing his vision on East Asian Cooperation at the Nikkei Conference, the Honourable Prime Minister observed and I quote

" I believe that our practical longer-term objective (which we should aspire to achieve over the next two decades) should be "E.U. Minus" and "ASEAN Plus" in other words, our practical longer term objective should be the creation in East Asia of the economic E.U without some of its unnecessary, burdensome or unproductive aspects, and the creation of the economic ASEAN plus many of the necessary and productive aspects that ASEAN itself has now targeted to achieve by 2020 " .

End of Quote

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

The distinguished Prime Minister has also indicated his willingness to take questions at the end of his keynote address.

May I now invite you to join me in welcoming the Honourable Prime Minister of Malaysia and to present his Keynote Address.