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**Title : OPENING STATEMENT AT THE FIRST MEETING OF THE 39TH
ASEAN STANDING COMMITTEE**

Excellencies, the Directors-General of ASEAN,

Deputy Secretary-General of ASEAN,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Malaysian Government, I wish to extend a very warm welcome to the Directors-General of ASEAN and the Deputy Secretary General of ASEAN, as well as members of your delegation to the First Meeting of the ASC here in Kuala Lumpur. It gives me great pleasure to be here today to address this First Meeting of the 39th ASC.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

2. Under the previous chairmanship of Indonesia and subsequently, Lao PDR, ASEAN has renewed its commitment towards the goal of establishing the ASEAN Community as envisaged by the ASEAN Vision 2020 and completed the process of drawing up the Road Map to achieve this objective. As you know, this was reflected in the ASEAN Concord II (Bali Concord II) which provided for the three pillars of the Community, as well as the adoption of the Vientiane Action Programme (VAP) and the Plans of Action of the ASEAN Security Community, the ASEAN Economic Community and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC).

3. In addition, the ASEAN Development Fund (ADF) has been established on 25 July 2005 at the 38th AMM in Vientiane in order to provide ASEAN with a common pool of financial resources to implement the VAP. This is done so that ASEAN will not be too dependent on external funding. With the ADF now in place, ASEAN is set to implement the activities under the VAP and the three Plans of Action to realize our objective of the ASEAN Community.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

4. As Chairman of the ASC, allow me to share with you the three broad priority areas of ASEAN which will be the focus when Malaysia holds the Chairmanship for one year. The overall objective is to ensure an effective and united ASEAN that will remain relevant for ASEAN Member Countries.

5. With the implementation of the VAP and the Plans of Actions of the three pillars of the ASEAN Community already set in motion, I believe that the first priority is for ASEAN to further intensify regional cooperation by carrying out VAP projects in a well-coordinated, effective and balanced manner. It is also my sincere hope that a people-centric approach will be taken into consideration in the process.

6. A second priority area is that ASEAN as an institution must be strengthened in order to meet the challenges ahead. While the strengthening of the ASEAN Secretariat is an on-going process, ASEAN has acknowledged the timely need to undertake a major review of its own institutional framework including its very structures and mechanisms. In this context, the establishment of an ASEAN Charter is indeed a crucial step as it will subsequently determine the basis for the development of its new institutional framework besides creating a legal personality for ASEAN. The Charter is also expected to define the rules of engagement among Member Countries.

7. A third priority, is for ASEAN to constantly strive towards enhancing its external relations, in particular with its Dialogue Partners, while continuing to remain in the driver's seat. In this regard, I would like to see more efforts directed towards further intensifying the areas of ASEAN + 3 cooperation which have rapidly expanded in recent years. This, I believe would spearhead and encourage the process towards the building of an East Asian community.

8. With these broad priorities in mind, I see that the ASC has several important tasks ahead. The ASC should assume a leadership role in supporting and facilitating ASEAN Committees and ASEAN sectoral bodies to conscientiously work at implementing the VAP with the two main objectives of narrowing the development gap and deepening our regional integration. This should be done with a view towards achieving the goal of building the ASEAN Community. It is my expectation that the ASC should be the main driving force behind ASEAN to continually strengthen itself by undertaking efforts to intensify regional cooperation among ASEAN Member Countries, as well as with the Dialogue Partners in the programme areas outlined in the VAP and the other Plans of Action.

9. Another important role of the ASC is to contribute to the review of the institutional framework of ASEAN and the streamlining of ASEAN meetings. I am happy to note that the process is well underway to establish an ASEAN Charter, a goal we strongly believe would rejuvenate ASEAN and reaffirm our commitment to the ideals upon which it was founded. As agreed at the 38th AMM, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers have endorsed the draft text of the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the Establishment of an ASEAN Charter, and it will be recommended for approval and signature by ASEAN Leaders at the 11th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur on 12 December 2005. For this purpose, an Eminent Persons Group on the ASEAN Charter is also in the process of being established.

10. On the streamlining of ASEAN meetings, I would like to recall that the Foreign Ministers at the 38th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) last July, have entrusted the ASC to work closely with the ASEAN Secretariat which has been tasked to take stock of existing ASEAN meetings including those of the ASEAN sectoral bodies, in order to prevent the overlapping of responsibilities and to monitor the growth of ASEAN bodies. It is my sincere hope that utmost efforts be made to optimize the use of ASEAN resources for maximum benefit in the convening of the necessary ASEAN meetings, while also improving the overall efficiency of ASEAN in undertaking regional cooperation efforts.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

11. As the ASC Chair, Malaysia is honored to host the 11th ASEAN Summit and the Related Summits that will include the inaugural ASEAN-Russia Summit as well as the First East Asia Summit (EAS). While we continue to emphasize on the expansion of ASEAN + 3 cooperation, the EAS would provide the opportunity for the ASEAN + 3 countries to engage in a constructive dialogue with countries outside the region on broad policy and strategic issues for the benefit of the region in the future. With regard to the ASEAN-Russia Summit, I am optimistic that the occasion would spearhead increased dialogue cooperation between ASEAN and Russia.

12. As we reflect on our progress in the political and economic fronts, I would also like the ASC to pay special attention to the implementation of the third pillar of the Bali Concord II i.e. the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. This, to me, is a key component in the process of community-building. It is about creating a sense of identity, belonging and well-being among the people of ASEAN. We should encourage constant efforts aimed at creating awareness about ASEAN. In this context, the ASC should also coordinate closely with the relevant sectoral bodies to continually highlight the benefits gained from ASEAN regional cooperation activities.

13. ASEAN has also endured its fair share of crisis and challenges over the last decade. It is therefore essential that the ASC must continually reinforce ASEAN's strengths such as its resilience, cohesiveness and a strong sense of regional solidarity in facing those challenges. Multi-faceted issues such as trans-boundary crimes, communicable diseases, natural disaster, rising oil prices and development issues, will continue to confront us. With our past experience, I am confident that ASEAN Member Countries are aware that regional collaborative efforts and a united front have been the most effective way in countering these challenges.

14. In this context, I believe that in moving towards ASEAN integration, we should be more open in the way we conduct our relations, be it from the perspective of human rights, governance or democracy. Consistent with the aim and objectives of the ASEAN Security Community, we should always strive to resolve problems through dialogue and cooperation. We should seriously consider establishing a mechanism for Preventive Diplomacy where issues of common concerns could be discussed and resolved.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

15. With the support and cooperation of all ASEAN Member Countries, I would like to give my assurances that Malaysia is determined to carry out the responsibilities of the Chair to the best of its ability, with particular emphasis on the implementation of the VAP and the goal of building an ASEAN Community.

16. Over the years, I have no doubt that the ASC has played a pertinent role in ensuring ASEAN's effectiveness in regional cooperation in functional and development areas as well as ASEAN's development in general. In this regard, I wish to take this opportunity to extend my special appreciation to all the ASEAN Directors-General and Secretary-General of ASEAN for your dedication and enthusiasm in carrying out your responsibilities. You have also been instrumental in cultivating a strong commitment and competence together with your officers and support staff involved in carrying out the work of the ASC.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

17. In conclusion, I have the fervent hope that the First Meeting of the 39th ASC will be fruitful, constructive and productive. I wish all of you a successful outcome of your deliberations in ensuring the continued progress and success of ASEAN.

18. With that, I am delighted to have the honour to officially declare open the First Meeting of the 39th ASEAN Standing Committee.

Thank you.