

Statement by H.E. Abhisit Vejjajiva, Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Thailand, at the Opening Ceremony of the 15th ASEAN Summit and Related Summits

Cha-am Hua Hin, Thailand, 23 October 2009

Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like, once again, to extend a very warm welcome to all of you to Cha-am Hua Hin.

Nine months ago, we all gathered here to pledge ourselves to work towards realising our aspiration to build a "people-centered ASEAN Community" that is rules-based and more effective in meeting the challenges of our times.

Today, we are gathering here again to reaffirm our commitment to driving our vision and dreams one step closer to becoming a reality.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

(Achievements)

As we move on to the new phase of ASEAN, we can proudly look back to what we have accomplished together during the past year.

We now formally have in place the ASEAN Charter that will make the organisation truly rules-based and more effective in enforcing what has been agreed upon among Member States. To make this achievement more tangible, we have adopted the Cha-am Hua Hin Declaration on the Roadmap for an ASEAN Community to guide our community-building efforts in all three pillars.

Indeed, an ASEAN Community has begun to institutionally come into place. The Committee of Permanent Representatives in Jakarta has been fully operationalised, and the three ASEAN Community Councils have already convened their respective Meetings to map out measures to achieve their targets and goals envisaged by the Charter.

Moreover, while advancing in these community-building efforts, ASEAN has had to weather the regional and global challenges, ranging from the economic and financial crisis, through the adverse impacts of climate change and food and energy security, to natural disaster and pandemic diseases. With both solidarity and togetherness, we have succeeded in keeping not only ASEAN relevant but also its vision alive.

In response to the global financial and economic crisis, we have acted promptly to convene a Special ASEAN Plus Three Finance Ministers' Meeting in February to expedite the launching of the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralisation (CMIM). Soon, at the end of this year, this regional self-help mechanism will be launched. Thailand will stand ready to temporarily host the CMI surveillance unit.

The representation of ASEAN in the G-20 Summits has also shown that ASEAN matters not just to the ten Southeast Asian nations, but also the rest of the world. We have made the voice of other developing countries heard in our attempt to cope with the economic and financial crisis both in London and Pittsburgh.

When people around the world were affected by the influenza A (H1N1), ASEAN, together with our Dialogue Partners in East Asia, convened a Special Session of ASEAN+3 Health Ministers Meeting in Bangkok to collectively deliberate on effective measures to prevent and control this pandemic.

We have also reaffirmed the common position of ASEAN and other developing countries in the negotiation under the UN Frameworks Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Thailand was pleased to play our part in hosting the Bangkok Climate Change Talks earlier this month to prepare for the Copenhagen Conference.

To ensure food security in our region, there have been efforts to transform the East Asia Emergency Rice Reserve Pilot Project into a permanent mechanism under the ASEAN Plus Three Emergency Rice Reserve. We should extend our full support to this effort and urge our Agriculture and Forestry Ministers, who will meet next month in Brunei Darussalam, to expedite the realisation of this permanent mechanism.

We have reinforced ASEAN's outward-looking character with the completion of Free Trade Agreements with all our key Partners in the region including China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand, and are now exploring the possibility of establishing a region-wide FTA.

Early this year, I had the pleasure to co-chair the Commemorative Summit with His Excellency the President of the Republic of Korea and next month, I will have the honour to co-chair the ASEAN-US Leaders Meeting with President Barack Obama in Singapore. We are also working closely with Russia to convene the ASEAN-Russia Summit in 2010.

I hope that our discussion with Dialogue Partners during the Related Summits will provide us with a clearer picture on how ASEAN can continue to be a driving force in the evolving regional architecture.

All these developments demonstrate the recognition that ASEAN has gained from the world community over the past one-and-a-half year as a rules-based and people-centred organisation which is committed to establishing a fully integrated community by 2015.

Indeed, ASEAN's many achievements can make us proud. ASEAN has delivered and thrived through the many global and regional challenges it has come to face with. What remains is the onus that lies on ASEAN to prove that it can implement whatever has been agreed, declared, or envisioned.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

(Vision for an ASEAN Community 2015)

Much has been discussed about realising an ASEAN Community---one that is a community of action, a community of connectivity, and a community of peoples. What we need to do is to collectively set a clear vision of what we want to achieve in the year 2015 and beyond. Let me share with you some of my thoughts on how we are going to achieve our vision.

As a "Community of Action", ASEAN can act decisively and promptly to address both internal and external threats as well as challenges to regional security and the well-being of our peoples.

We have to start thinking about a new approach in the way we do things. In this increasingly globalised era, we no longer enjoy the luxury of time. In order to address these challenges effectively, our institutional structures should be strengthened so that the decisions can be made promptly whereas their execution can also be done in a timely manner. In this connection, I strongly support the role of the Secretary-General in bringing pressing issues to the attention of ASEAN Leaders for immediate action.

Second, as a "Community of Connectivity", ASEAN will be a region where goods and peoples, as well as investments and initiatives can move across the borders without obstacles. This can come about through concerted efforts to enhance region-wide multi-modal transportation linkages, including maritime, land and air transport. The challenge of logistics must also be jointly addressed. The 'missing links' in respective infrastructure development projects should also be completed by the end of the five-year ASEAN Transport Action Plan in 2010. Supporting legal infrastructure and rules for trade facilitation should also be harmonised to facilitate intra-regional transportation and communication.

It is evident that connectivity is at the heart of ASEAN centrality and will contribute to sustainable growth and prosperity of a vibrant East Asia at large. Inevitably, the success of this concept will largely depend on adequate funding for each project. To this end, the idea of establishing an Infrastructure Development Fund for ASEAN deserves our serious consideration, whereas participation and support from our Partners within and beyond our region should be welcomed.

This ASEAN Connectivity is only the first step. It needs to be linked with a larger East Asian connectivity where ASEAN will be connected to the rest of the Asia-Pacific region, bringing about progress and prosperity to all.

Enhancing connectivity does not mean that peoples are only connected through physical means but also required the connecting of the hearts and minds of ASEAN peoples across the region. We need to promote intellectual and cultural connection based on friendship and mutual understanding of our common goals and shared historical heritage. This people-to-people connection will contribute to the 'we-feeling ASEAN' which is one of the key elements in our communitybuilding process. In this connection, Thailand, on our part, is pleased to launch an ASEAN television channel to serve as a means to foster better understanding and promote common identity among ASEAN peoples.

Third, and most importantly, as a "Community of Peoples" that promotes both equitable access to human development opportunities and human rights and fundamental freedoms, our peoples should be the ultimate beneficiaries of our future ASEAN Community. ASEAN has always sought to improve the quality of lives of its peoples. ASEAN relevancy in the future will be judged from our ability to respond to challenges affecting the well-being of our peoples in a concrete and timely manner. Our cooperation should also focus on empowering our peoples to be able to compete in a more globalised world through education and human resources development. We also need to make ASEAN continue to engage with peoples to ensure that people are given the opportunity to actively participate in and feel a sense of ownership in this ASEAN community-building process.

In this connection, ASEAN Leaders already took a bold step forward by convening an Informal Meeting with representatives from the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (AIPA), ASEAN Youth and ASEAN Civil Society Organisation during the 14th ASEAN Summit early this year. As the Chairman of ASEAN, I myself subsequently met with AIPA Leaders during the 30th AIPA General Assembly in Pattaya in August. They pledged to support our communitybuilding process through early ratification of ASEAN agreements, harmonisation of laws as well as raising ASEAN awareness among our peoples. I therefore hope that these constructive dialogues will continue to take place in the years to come.

At the same time, we should make ASEAN a symbol of the hopes and values of our peoples. The purposes and the principles enshrined in the ASEAN Charter, including the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, should be translated into concrete action.

In this regard, I am pleased to note that, in about two hours from now, our fifteen-year-dream will come true with the inauguration of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. This important body, together with the establishment of the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children next year, will generate a momentum in an effort to promote and protect human rights in the region. It will also increase the 'comfort level' of all ASEAN Member States to be able to accept a more enhanced role of this body in the future.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The task ahead of us will not be easy, as governments alone cannot make it happen. It is the responsibility of all sectors in the society including the private sectors, the civil society, as well as each and every one of us, to move forward our 'ASEAN Community'. Considering the changing dynamics of the region and of the world, we must work to sustain the efforts to achieve our goals. With sheer determination and in a spirit of cooperation, I am confident that we can collectively achieve a true ASEAN Community.

On my part, I am ready to work closely with all of you to ensure the concrete outcome of the 15th ASEAN Summit and Related Summits, so that, by the time we pass on this same torch to Viet Nam three months from now, ASEAN will be on course to becoming a more action-oriented and better-connected community for the benefit of our peoples.

Thank you.