

ASEAN Day 2013 Remarks by New Zealand Ambassador David Taylor

Secretary General Minh, Minister Natalegawa, Ambassador Teo and other members of the Committee of Permanent Representatives, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

Today I have the honour to deliver remarks on behalf of ASEAN's dialogue partners and other international friends, as we gather to mark the 46th ASEAN Day.

If the five founding leaders of ASEAN were with us for today's celebration, I think they would be amazed. Amazed that their vision of a peaceful, secure and united South East Asia has come to pass. Amazed that ASEAN now encompasses ten members and might yet expand.

And amazed that their initiative has been developed so substantially to include the establishment of an ASEAN Economic Community by the end of 2015 that will progressively bring down barriers within the region and create substantial new development and business opportunities.

They would certainly approve of Brunei's cohesive theme for 2013, "Our people our future together". And they would applaud, as should we all, the excellent leadership Brunei has shown in taking forward ASEAN's ambitious agenda and managing the challenges of Summits and scores of other Ministerial and official meetings.

They would certainly welcome the work of the ASEAN Secretariat which supports all elements of the ASEAN agenda and which through its staff brings together the diversity and the energy of the region, its peoples and cultures.

To Secretary General Minh and your hard-working ASEC team, thank you for your contributions and your partnership with international friends.

The founding fathers might be surprised to find that ASEAN now sits at the very centre of regional architecture and diplomacy; a far cry from the circumstances of 1967.

ASEAN's leadership in the East Asia Summit, the wide range of ASEAN and ASEAN plus architecture and the contributions of its members through processes like APEC, the Asia Europe Meeting, the Forum for East Asia Latin America Cooperation and the G-20 give this region due prominence in regional and global councils.

ASEAN has also achieved phenomenal economic progress. The ASEAN collective now ranks as the 7th largest economy in the world. Every projection has ASEAN climbing further up the rankings in the decades ahead.

And as economic prosperity grows, poverty will diminish further. ASEAN has already made great strides with the development of a thriving middle class in all member states and a reduction in the numbers of absolute poor across the region.

ASEAN has also become a creative force for change in the Asia-Pacific region.

The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership negotiations which were initiated this year and which will hopefully create the world's largest free trade area are one example.

Another is the establishment of new bodies and initiatives at different levels to address regional needs.

The East Asia Summit is a peak body for leaders to address issues of concern.

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The ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance Centre helps coordination and cooperation on the natural disasters that regularly affect countries in the region.

The Initiative for Integration and Narrowing the Development Gap helps fast track progress in the CLMV countries and other sub-regions.

The ASEAN Human Rights Declaration last year and the book to be launched later this morning show a commitment to lifting the game around respect, promotion and protection of human rights.

I could go on, but these four very different initiatives speak to the determination of ASEAN to play an active role, not on the margins in the region or in individual countries, but in the centre and as a collective.

ASEAN is truly finding ways to link national and regional interests so that strengths are enhanced and weaknesses addressed.

There is still work to do, as the Secretary General has said. The ambitious forward agenda speaks to that. So too do critics of ASEAN who call for faster and ever deeper action across a wide front.

ASEAN's work is difficult and progress is hard won.

Creating a community, breaking down the barriers of history, different languages, and in some cases vastly different economic circumstances, takes careful and deft diplomacy.

The dialogue partners and other international friends of ASEAN have made important contributions to regional peace, prosperity and development over the decades since 1967.

New Zealand, along with Japan and Australia, was in the vanguard of countries establishing dialogue relationships with ASEAN 40 years ago.

I know that the political leadership in New Zealand values highly that special connection and all that we have shared over the years.

I am sure that all of ASEAN's partners would make a similar declaration.

Secretary General, Minister, CPR members and ASEC staff, on behalf of the more than 70 Ambassadors to ASEAN, our heartfelt congratulations and best wishes as the dream of 1967 continues to thrive and to evolve.

We continue to welcome ASEAN's leadership, to praise your achievements, to assist you to deal with the challenges that still confront this dynamic region and to make the most of the new opportunities that lie before us.

And we extend our thanks to your founding fathers for daring to start to dream.

And also to subsequent generations of leaders who have kept that dream alive, all the while working with your friends and partners in this region and beyond.

Thank you.