

Speech
by
H.E. Le Luong Minh, Secretary-General of ASEAN
at
ASEM High-Level Conference on Intercultural
and Inter-Religious Dialogue

3 July 2014, Boris Yeltsin Presidential Library
Saint-Petersburg, Russian Federation

Madam Chair,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset, allow me to express my sincere appreciation to the Government of the Russian Federation for hosting and inviting the Delegation from the ASEAN Secretariat to this important ASEM High-Level Conference on Intercultural and Inter-religious Dialogue

Religious harmony and social cohesion have always been high on the agenda of national, regional and global platforms. We highly value the role of ASEM in promoting inter-religious and intercultural tolerance, understanding and respect, particularly through the ASEM Interfaith Dialogue. Since it was first launched in 2005 in Bali, Indonesia, the Dialogue has been instrumental in promoting constructive exchanges of ideas among government officials, academics, and civil society actors, particularly religious leaders, from Asia and Europe. These dialogues, conducted in the spirit of respect and mutual understanding, have greatly contributed to bridging peoples of different faiths and cultures in the two continents. ASEAN is also contributing to this endeavour. Key initiatives are being pursued in the ASEAN region to promote inter-religious and intercultural tolerance, understanding and respect. ASEAN countries were active in the process leading to the unanimous adoption of the United

Nations General Assembly resolution calling on all UN member-states to take steps to further promote inter-religious and intercultural dialogue, tolerance and understanding; affirming that mutual understanding and inter-religious dialogue constitute important dimensions of the culture of peace; lauding the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion as an integral part to building tolerant societies and durable peace; reaffirming the solemn commitment of the United Nations to promote universal respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms, in line with the United Nations Charter and Universal Declaration of Human Rights ; and encouraging the promotion of dialogue among media from all cultures.

*Madam Chair,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

Recognising that moderation is an important ASEAN value, the ASEAN Leaders at the 20th ASEAN Summit in 2010, adopted the Global Movement of Moderates (GMM) initiative as a regional endeavour to mainstream “moderation” as a key value to promote tolerance, trust and mutual understanding, as well as placing dialogue on the basis of respect for international law, respect for most fundamental principles of relations such as the principles of non-use or threat of use of force, self-restrained as an important tool for peaceful solution of disputes. The Initiative is aimed at combating the scourge of extremism in five broad areas including peaceful co-existence, democracy and rule of law, finance, education and conflict resolution. The convening of the 2012 Interfaith Summit in Bali is another testament to the steadfastness of ASEAN Member States in promoting religious harmony and social cohesion. The Summit shared a new view of interfaith cooperation, calling on religious leaders to move beyond mere tolerance by affirming the universal principles common to all faiths. Their vision of interfaith cooperation begins from the recognition that all people are endowed by the Creator with equal value and therefore share a common spiritual heritage. This is the original source of human rights and human dignity. Because all people have intrinsic value, they aspire to realise a global community of equality and respect.

More than 200 religious leaders, delegates from inter-religious councils and peace scholars from ASEAN Member States met in Bangkok and Pattani, Thailand from 17-19 September 2012, to address the role of religion and inter-religious cooperation in resolving conflicts and building

peace in the ASEAN region. The participants of the conference committed themselves to establishing and strengthening national inter-religious mechanisms in their respective countries and to developing a network of Inter-religious Councils in ASEAN to further strengthen inter-religious actions to prevent conflicts, promote development, and advance peace in ASEAN countries and the region as a whole.

With ASEAN being a politically, economically and culturally diverse region, amongst the objectives of the ASEAN Community building is ASEAN's holistic approach towards promoting harmony and mutual understanding among the peoples of ASEAN. In realising the ASEAN Community, the Member States are expected to subscribe to a common set of values, goals and objectives. As envisaged in the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint, the primary goal of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community is to contribute to the realisation of an ASEAN Community that is people-oriented, people-centred and socially responsible with a view to achieving enduring solidarity and unity among the nations and peoples of ASEAN. This goal can be accomplished by forging a common identity and building a caring and sharing society, which is inclusive and harmonious, where the well-being, livelihood and the welfare of the peoples are enhanced. The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community has been working with and through the other pillars in the building of a strong foundation for a Community that respects the different cultures, languages and religions of the peoples of ASEAN, their common values in the spirit of unity in diversity and adapt theirs to present realities, opportunities and challenges. The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community recognises the importance of unity, common identity and values of the peoples of ASEAN as much as the other two pillars, the ASEAN Political Security Community and the ASEAN Economic Community, which are interdependent and interrelated and uphold many common values such as justice, harmony, the rule of law, human rights, fair competition, unity in diversity, participation, transparency and social and environmental responsibility. The closely intertwined three pillars of the ASEAN Community are envisaged to ensure durable peace, stability and shared prosperity in the region. With emphasis on working with the people, the ASEAN Social-Cultural Community plays a significant role in realising a people-oriented and people-centred and socially responsible ASEAN Community, thus strengthening the linkages amongst the three pillars.

As we work towards realising the ASEAN Community at the end of 2015, ASEAN has now embarked on developing its post-2015 Vision. The Bandar Seri Begawan Declaration on the ASEAN Community's Post-2015 Vision, adopted in 2013, stresses the importance of a Vision that promotes a truly people-oriented, people-centred and rules-based ASEAN. This further implies that with the increasingly complex political and economic situations facing ASEAN, the attempt to build an inclusive and harmonious community should be intensified. ASEAN will continue to contribute to promoting religious harmony and social cohesion not only within the ASEAN region, but also in the wider neighbourhood, as well as globally. The ASEM framework is an important platform that ASEAN could contribute to further promote such values.

*Madam Chair,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

As stressed by the Leaders of ASEM partner countries at their 9th Summit in 2012, the interfaith and intercultural dialogues, and their contribution to promoting social cohesion, peace, and development in the context of increasing societal interdependence and religious and cultural diversity in Asia and Europe are immensely important. Both regions should work closely to keep the momentum of the commitment of the Leaders of ASEM partner countries to take concerted action to further promote mutual understanding, tolerance and exchanges, as well as taking global leadership in working towards building a world where human beings in their diversity of faiths, religions, languages and cultures co-exist in harmony, and enjoy equal rights and mutual respect.

Let us also be cognizant of global efforts that will help heal the religious divide. The World Interfaith Harmony Week was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in resolution A/RES/65/5 adopted on 20 October 2010. In the resolution, the General Assembly, points out that mutual understanding and inter-religious dialogue constitute important dimensions of a culture of peace and establishes World Interfaith Harmony Week as a way to promote harmony between all peoples regardless of their faith. There is a great imperative indeed for dialogue among different faiths and religions to enhance mutual understanding, harmony and cooperation among peoples, and for all States to support that week to spread of

the message of interfaith harmony and goodwill in the world's churches, mosques, synagogues, temples and other places of worship, on a voluntary basis and according to their own religious traditions or convictions. ASEAN will continue to work with ASEM partner countries to strengthen the processes of intercultural and inter-religious dialogue for peace, stability and development and prosperity.

Thank you for your kind attention!