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Statement
by
His Excellency Abhisit Vejjajiva
Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Thailand
at the Opening Ceremony of the 14th ASEAN Summit
Cha-am/Hua Hin, 28 February 2009

Your Majesty,
Your Excellencies,
Secretary-General of ASEAN,
Ministers, Parliamentarians,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Overview -- From Lam Taen to Cha-am/ Hua Hin: a Forty Year Journey

More than four decades ago, ASEAN's Founding Fathers met at Lam Taen, Chonburi, a seaside sub-district, just across the Gulf of Thailand from where we are today. They were motivated by a shared dream – a dream to unite countries in the region in the common pursuit of a peaceful, harmonious and prosperous community of Southeast Asian nations. Hence, with the signing of the Bangkok Declaration on 8 August 1967, ASEAN came into existence.

Today, ASEAN has returned once again to Thailand as we are meeting here in Cha-am/Hua Hin . And we are here to bear witness to the fruits of the ASEAN Founding Fathers' creation.

From Laem Taen to Cha-am/Hua Hin, we have developed strong bonds of friendship and cooperation by forging mutual confidence and trust and working together for a common cause. During times of crises, we have jointly tackled problems. During times of peace, we have created opportunities for our peoples. No matter what the challenges were, from conflict during the Cold War to the financial crisis of 1997, we in ASEAN have come through by acting together.

Starting with five, we are now ten – comprising a grouping of unique diversity, yet firmly united in a common purpose. It is with this common purpose that we are destined to become a more integrated, more effective and more compassionate Community that serves its most important stakeholder, namely, the peoples of ASEAN.

Today, we are reinforcing the foundations of this burgeoning ASEAN Community. We gather here for the first ASEAN Summit under a new ASEAN Charter, which, together with the plans of action for the development of all three pillars of the ASEAN Community, serves as a blueprint for our common future. Most importantly, in forging ahead, ASEAN will put peoples first -- in its vision, in its policies, and in its action plans.

That is why we have chosen the theme “ASEAN Charter for ASEAN Peoples” for this Summit. It underlines the fundamental core of our philosophy of making the peoples the ultimate beneficiary of the ASEAN Community. Equally important, it underscores the new reality of today – the reality of peoples becoming more assertive in their demands, and more active in the pursuit of their interests through various types of activities. After the promulgation of the Charter, the over 570 million people of ASEAN have been awoken. They will demand their share, their ownership and their role in the ASEAN process. How we intend to manage this new reality is of crucial importance to all of us.

Building a Regional Environment of Peace and Prosperity

As we look towards realizing an ASEAN Community by the year 2015, we need to continue to build a regional environment that is conducive to peace and prosperity. ASEAN will continue to be centrally located between growing poles of growth and power in the wider Asia-Pacific region, with Northeast Asia on one side and South Asia on the other. The challenge is how we can maintain ASEAN centrality in this evolving regional architecture.

Reinforcing the ASEAN Community is one way.

We need to intensify our efforts at community-building so that we will continue to be a significant force for promoting a peaceful and stable regional order.

For the Political-Security Community, we need to proceed with the shaping and sharing of regional norms and codes of conduct that will serve to reinforce trust and confidence amongst our peoples and within our region.

For the Economic Community, we need to accelerate the development of an attractive single market and production base that will help attract foreign trade and investment.

For the Socio-Cultural Community, we need to become a more sharing and caring society, ensuring that the human security needs of our peoples are met.

We also need to make ASEAN more rules-based. Having been conferred legal personality, ASEAN must be credible and transparent in the way it conducts business. Compliance, monitoring and the amicable settlement of disputes will be the order of the day.

We need to make ASEAN more people-centred. Protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms is a key feature of our Community. The establishment of an ASEAN human rights body by this year, the first ever of its kind in the region, will be a big step in this direction.

We also need to promote public participation in the ASEAN community-building process. Earlier today, we have listened to the views of our peoples through members of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly, youth leaders, representatives of civil society organisations and private sectors. I fervently hope that this will be an important turning point in our effort to create a sense of ‘ASEAN citizenship’ among our peoples and turn their aspirations into concrete activities.

Enhancing engagement with external partners is another.

While reinforcing ourselves internally, we need to continue to strengthen ASEAN's links with the rest of the world and revitalise ASEAN's role and contributions in various regional frameworks, institutions and processes, in a manner that benefits all countries.

We need to underscore ASEAN's role in the evolving regional architecture, strengthen regional economic and financial stability in partnership with other East Asian countries and cooperate with our friends to address pressing issues affecting our peoples.

This Summit is the first of two parts.

Later on in the year, Thailand will convene the ASEAN Plus Three and East Asia Summits, the dates of which are being worked out in consultation with all participating countries. We will also chair the ASEAN Regional Forum and the Post-Ministerial Conferences in July and have scheduled the 15th ASEAN Summit for October.

Close partnership with those outside the region is crucial. For in our interdependent and globalised world, no man is an island, no region or country can stand alone. We are all interconnected, part of the global whole. Left to ourselves, we are all vulnerable.

ASEAN thus extends its hand of partnership and friendship, to Dialogue Partners and External Parties alike, to make this region a better place for all. In this regard, we recognise the presence of Ambassadors accredited to ASEAN who are also here with us to reaffirm their full support and cooperation in our community-building efforts.

Our friends and partners worldwide, please rest assured that you will find in ASEAN a reliable partner for peace and prosperity, a vibrant economic community and compassionate societies, and most importantly, a sincere friend to all.

Strengthening Regional Resilience Today

When ASEAN was created, the regional environment was dominated by conflict, and the region was under the shadow of the Cold War. Today, we face a different set of challenges. Many of the threats confronting ASEAN are non-traditional in nature and affect all peoples across borders.

From the adverse impact of the global financial crisis and climate change to threats to food and energy security, from transboundary issues arising from natural disasters and pandemics to problems that threaten human security such as transnational crimes, from the scourge of drug-trafficking to the victims of human-trafficking and terrorism, ASEAN must be able to respond effectively and in a timely manner to all these challenges of our times.

I therefore welcome the fruitful results of the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM). Just concluded in Pattaya, the meeting underscored not only the

importance of partnership between the defense and civil society organisations, but also the use of military assets for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and response. I hope from this and other meetings that ASEAN can develop an effective ASEAN disaster response “team” -- an arrangement with standard operating procedures whereby ASEAN can respond effectively and quickly to major disasters, whether natural disaster or pandemics, working in close coordination with the ASEAN Secretary-General and other Partners in other regions.

I likewise welcome the progress achieved in the discussions amongst the ASEAN+3 Finance Ministers’ Meeting in Phuket last week which gave political impetus to a multilateralized Chiangmai Initiative (CMI-M) and other measures to help address the global financial crisis and its impact on our region. I hope that from this meeting and our further discussions at the Summit, we can agree on a “Cha-am/Hua Hin Package” that will serve as the stepping stone for a series of regional initiatives, to be developed in concert with other countries in East Asia, to help address the impact of the global financial crisis in the region. Indeed, ASEAN is at the frontier of an economic battle and recovery. We will be severely tested from now on, both as a group and as a part of the broader Asian region. As the financial crisis deepens, the world will look towards our region for action and for confidence, which is exactly what we in ASEAN are set out to do.

At the World Economic Forum in Davos, I have already shared my perspective on helping address the food security challenge through elimination of market distortions. In April, I hope to be able to voice ASEAN’s concerns and ideas at the London Summit, in my capacity as ASEAN Chair and alongside the President of Indonesia, based on the advice and recommendations that I expect to get from colleagues at this Summit.

Each of us brings to the table a wealth of experience, capabilities and assets that are more effective when put to good use together than when utilized separately. The key is to be able to work together to come up with ASEAN solutions to not only ASEAN problems but also to global challenges with regional implications. This is what is expected of an ASEAN Community.

Conclusion

When I took office as Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Thailand not long ago, I pledged to the Thai people that I would do my utmost to ensure that Thailand continues to be the land of freedom, the land of opportunity and the land of smiles.

Now, as then, I wish to make a similar pledge to the peoples of ASEAN.

I will ensure that, during our Chairmanship, I will, with the support of our fellow ASEAN Leaders, try to push towards realising the vision and dreams of our Founding Fathers to build an ASEAN Community of sharing and caring societies.

I am honoured to be able to work with fellow ASEAN Leaders to secure for our peoples and for future generations the blessings of enduring peace, stability and prosperity.

Lastly, as a citizen of ASEAN, I will join hands with fellow ASEAN citizens across the region to make ASEAN a household name, not only for the people of Southeast Asia but for those beyond.

From Lam Taen to Cha-am/Hua Hin, the journey over the last forty two years has led us to the fulfilment of one dream, that of ASEAN's Founding Fathers, and to the beginning of yet another -- that of building and completing a people-centred, dynamic and compassionate ASEAN Community for all.

We are going to witness ASEAN moving towards our goal. It is not for the rich and the powerful, but for the people of our community. It is not in the number of countries we have but in the strength of our unity. We must move not only in unison but also in the same direction. It is not how old we are but how much we achieved in the past and will achieve in the future.

As we look forward to the year 2015, may I call on all of you, as fellow ASEAN citizens and as Friends of ASEAN, to join me on this continuing journey and to realise this common dream together.

Thank you.
