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Speech
By
Chan Siang Sun

Speech by Deputy Minister of Information,
Y.B. Dato' Chan Siang Sun, at the Opening
of BERNAMA-AMIC Seminar on 'Communication
Challenges in Asia' at Ming Court Hotel in
Kuala Lumpur at 8.00 p.m. on November 20, 1985

Allow me, first of all, to thank BERNAMA and the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre, the organisers of this seminar, for your kind invitation to inaugurate this prestigious gathering of yours. My Minister, Y.B. Datuk Rais Yatim, to whom the invitation was originally extended, is not able to come due to an official commitment overseas. He has requested me to extend his apology for not being able to be with you here tonight.

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Being present at this hall here tonight makes me feel both honoured and somewhat nervous. I feel honoured because this is indeed a rare opportunity for me to meet you -- distinguished delegates and guests -- whom I was told are communication leaders in this part of the world. At the same time, I am a bit uneasy as I am no expert as you are and as such, am not sure whether or not what I am going to say will be acceptable to you. That being the case, it is not my intention, therefore, to dwell at length on a subject which is too dear to you.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

As all of you are well aware, communication and its related subjects have of late been the topics of continuous discussions at various seminars, forums, conventions and the like at either international, regional or national levels. I believe so long as there are problems, we should not stop discussing the subject.

To me, the theme that you have chosen for this seminar -- 'Communication Challenges in Asia' -- is both excellent and timely. This is particularly so in view of the rapid progress the region is now undergoing, be it in terms of physical development, technological

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advancement or socio-cultural upliftment. There is no doubt that increased modernisation of the society brought about by greater urbanisation and general economic development has considerably raised the people's level of expectation and aspirations. The need for adequate and uninterrupted flow of information will also be ever increasing. This scenario vis-a-vis the availability or non-availability of modern communication infrastructure, has no doubt posed various challenges to communicators in the Asian region.

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Although the nature of challenges differs from country to country depending on the level of development, socio-cultural setting and communication infrastructure available in the different countries of Asia, I think it is safe for me to say that the question of imbalanced flow of information between the developed and developing nations, the danger of cultural colonization likely to be brought about by the current communication explosion, the shortage of funds and professionally trained manpower to purchase and handle sophisticated hardwares and the sensitivities of governments towards the need for a free flow of information will continue to be of concern to the

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region in the years to come.

To me, all this -- to name a few -- are challenges that should be overcome if we were to achieve our goal of creating a well-informed modern society. I am sure for the next two days you will identify more problems and challenges in the course of your deliberations. Indeed I am not qualified to speak on behalf of other countries. But on behalf of my country, we in the government in general and in the Ministry of Information in particular, are well aware of the problems.

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We are also aware that of late there has been a lot of criticisms against what appears to be the government's monopoly of the media channels in this country. As a result of this perceived monopoly, the critics say, electronic media are daily bombarding the audience with official propaganda stuffs while the pages of our newspapers are said to be full of protocol news.

Although I am not very sure what is meant by protocol news, I can assure you that the Malaysian government as an institution does not control the media. The various legislations that we have are

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only meant to regulate the media so as not to infringe national security. In fact, some of you might recall that since the present government leadership took over some years ago, it had taken a comparatively liberal attitude towards the press. The granting of a licence to run a private TV station, for example, is one of the several steps to diversify the electronic media channels in this country. In addition, the permits to publish newspapers, known as KDN in this country, have also been liberally issued for the past several years.

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While Radio and TV Malaysia is part of the government machinery and thus their primary task is to propagate the government's policies and programmes, the choice of messages published in the private media, including newspapers, is entirely their own.

Although I admit that more often than not our newspapers are publishing speeches of government leaders, they are not, to my mind, protocol in nature. Behind these exhortations surely lie some news values.

Besides, we have also seen lately that Malaysian

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newspapers are beginning to give prominence to readers' columns in their pages. The appearance of such special columns as 'Inquiry', 'Time-Probe', 'Hotline' and 'Gerak Kilat' on the pages of our major newspapers has indeed contributed a lot towards the expansion of the feed-back channels to the government. This is in addition to the existing traditional channels such as the network of Information Field Officers, Agricultural Extension Workers, Community Relations (KEMAS) Officers and scores of others.

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Over the RTM, the introduction of public affairs programmes such as 'Scope', 'Ehwal Semasa' and 'Kesuma', to mention a few, has also proven to be useful not only for the general members of the public to express their opinion on certain issues but also for the government to gather feedbacks.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Assuming that the concern expressed by the critics over the choice of messages by our newspapers is valid, one wonders how come major newspapers in

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this country are making huge profits every year despite the recession. By so saying, I do not mean that profit-making should be the sole objective of a newspaper.

However, insofar as the government is concerned, I personally feel that while recognising the right of the audience to uninterrupted flow of information, the government also has the right to ^{be}hear ^h. Afterall, this is only logical in any democratic system.

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Perhaps, there is now a need to draw a confluence between the two rights. This, in effect, is another challenge that you, the experts, should try to overcome.

With this observation, ladies and gentlemen, I am now privileged to declare this seminar on 'Communication Challenges in Asia' open.

Thank you.