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Paper No. 3
Seminar on "Press Freedom and Professional Standards in Asia"
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, May 16 – 18, 1996

Welcome Address by Vijay Menon, Secretary-General, AMIC

It gives me great pleasure to welcome all of you to this Seminar on "Press Freedom and Professional Standards in Asia", organized by AMIC, Malaysia and Singapore. I am delighted that we have been joined by the Secretary-Treasurer of the Commonwealth Association for Education in Journalism and Communication (CAEJAC), its Media Laws Editorial Committee and many members, who have given this seminar an interesting international dimension. We also have with us James Bentley, Regional Communication Adviser, who will give us the benefit of UNESCO's global experience.

This meeting brings together over 60 participants, from 16 countries, to examine Asian perspectives of press freedom, and a number of related issues, such as, the role of media monitoring mechanisms, press councils and journalists' unions, the impact of the new multimedia environment on the press and the social and cultural factors affecting press freedom.

The theme is not new. But it is one of perennial interest both for the criticism, often misconceived, voiced from outside the region and the concern voiced from within. About three months ago, speaking on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Indonesian Journalists' Association, President Suharto called for greater professionalism within the ranks and for the adoption of an attitude which reflected the "features and characteristics of Indonesia". A press which simply followed international counterparts in order to be commercially successful, could not "reflect the characteristics of Indonesia...and can no longer be regarded as a national press", he said.

Less than a year ago, inaugurating an AMIC seminar at this very venue, Malaysia’s Minister of Information, pointed out that "whether we like it or not, news is big business and the increasing intrusion of the boardroom into newsroom decision-making is a fait accompli...The dilemma that confronts many journalists today is whether they are willing to subscribe to the values of the boardroom rather than the newsroom".

Many western proponents of pluralism seek to promote western-style press freedom in Asia. But this is often at variance with the Asian view. Indonesia has shaped its social, political and cultural institutions within the framework of its Pancasila philosophy which stresses, among other things, national unity and consensual democracy. It does not support individualism and individual rights.

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Malaysia’s national ideology, Rukunegara, emphasises national unity, democracy, social equity and traditional culture. Singapore’s core values also lay stress on the community, family, consensus, and racial and religious tolerance.

The differing perceptions of the role of the media as between the West and Asia are not confined to officials. Senior journalists in ASEAN have proposed an Asian model of journalism in which the press works with the government to build a national consensus. The national press, it is felt, as an instrument of nation building, should support development efforts.

It is our hope that this meeting with so many distinguished participants from across the region will provide current insights and practical recommendations for action.

For the benefit of those who are unfamiliar with our organization, I would like to briefly explain that AMIC was established in 1971 in Singapore as a non-profit foundation for the development of mass communication in the region. This year, we celebrate our Silver Jubilee -- 25 years of serving the region through our documentation, publications, research, training and consultancy services.

What is most gratifying to us is the support that we are privileged to receive from within the region and outside. The Government of Singapore and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung of Germany have helped us since our inception. The governments of Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Nepal have formal agreements of cooperation with us. And a number of institutions in Asia, Europe and America support our efforts. This seminar and the book to follow are assisted by the Utusan Melayu Group and the New Straits Times in Malaysia, by the Communication Assistance Foundation of the Netherlands, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency and Unesco-Kuala Lumpur.

We are grateful to you, Dato’ Shafie Apdal, for joining us this morning to formally inaugurate this important seminar. Your presence and that of our many distinguished guests will be a source of encouragement and inspiration to all of us to work for the successful attainment of the seminar objectives. Our thanks also go to our keynote speaker, chairpersons, speakers and discussants -- who have readily agreed to give us the benefit of their time and thoughts so that our meeting might be fruitful. A special word of thanks is due today to Tan Sri Kamarul Ariffin and to the Organizing Committee headed by Encik Zainoor Sulaiman, AMIC’s energetic Country Representative for Malaysia.

Once again, thank you for being with us this morning. I hope you will join us in Singapore on June 1 for our 25th Anniversary Conference.

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