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Speech

By

Y B Dato Mohamed Rahmat
I am indeed happy that this seminar has brought together Asean intellectuals. I feel the theme 'Mass Media and Socio-Economic Change' to be more than timely for what we are witnessing today is the dramatic growth of the media in support of the efforts of different Governments in bringing about socio-economic changes for the benefit of their peoples.

Modern Governments operate in many ways, one of the important ways is as a communicator. As you well know, democratic governments are based on the concept of an intelligent and enlightened citizenry. And this can be achieved only if the government facilitates communication between itself and its citizens. Governments therefore maintain public information services to discharge this unique responsibility -- that of government self-explanation.

One widely accepted definition of a democratic government specifies it as.... 'A Government which accepts, in the fullest sense the responsibility to explain itself and ensure that it is fully understood by the citizenry' Having accepted the responsibility of explaining its actions and policies, governments in the free world have at their disposal numerous devices for carrying messages. These include the various mass media, meetings, displays and so on. I would be right in saying that all Asean Governments systematically make use of the mass media for communicating
with their respective public; for offering explanations to their citizens.

In more recent years the quality of performance in all media has become a matter of concern to government. Government itself is acutely aware that democracy would flounder unless governments explained themselves clearly and candidly to their citizens.

The techniques used in the early days of our independence showed a lack of understanding of local problems. There was little or no synchronisation between information publicity and project implementation - the result of lack of co-ordination between information communication and the physical progress on the ground left much to be desired.

The period immediately following independence found us in a position where demands requiring our simultaneous attention existed in many fields. So much was left undone by the colonial government, and the expectation of our newly independent population called for immediate action. Both funds and manpower requirements to fulfil these expectations, far exceeded our ability to cope with the demands. We had to adjust our priorities. The pointer seemed to indicate
priority to the necessary infrastructures, such as watersupply, electricity, roads and bridges, schools, hospitals and so on. Our First Malaysia plan started with this objective. There was no time to prepare our media towards development support functions.

However I am glad to state that with the emergence of the Third Malaysia Plan, we have orientated our media to that of a development support mass media, which hinges on two way communication between government and the public. We realized that the media must use an approach that is acceptable to the public. The public must be educated and stimulated to support the development projects initiated by the government. Social values and norms must be restructured to fit itself into the new framework that independence and development has brought us to. We also realize that there cannot be any set pattern, previously used by developed countries which can be adopted in toto by us. Western orientated techniques can only be used, in so far as it provides some guidelines, but essentially it is left to us to remould our communication concepts to blend with the local environment and values.
I think I am right in saying that Governments of Asean countries have come a long way from those days of trial and error. That each of us has identified our own particular needs and those of our publics. And now that we are gathered here in Kuala Lumpur, we shall benefit collectively from each other's techniques and strategies.

From your programme I see a very wide and significant range of topics for discussion. You have:

* Ethics and Social Responsibility;
* Media and National Development;
* The Educational Role of the Media, and
* The 'Watchdog role of the Media'.

You can rest assured, ladies and gentlemen, that points emerging from your deliberations will not go unnoticed by us in Malaysia or by our respective Governments, all of whom are more than anxious to improve the lot of our people. For my part, I personally feel a gathering of Asean communication specialists to be of great significance because our cultural, social, linguistic and national aspirations strike up similar patterns. I am sure the kind of socio-economic sentiments
our visiting speakers would be expressing today and tomorrow would fundamentally be in harmony with our very own.

In the area of regional co-operation, I am glad to note that some of the Asean programmes launched, involving the Press, radio, television, motion pictures and public relations are gathering momentum. In order to provide better information within and without this region, regular publications such as the Asean Journal, Asean Film magazine and the Asean News Bulletin have been published. Exchange of radio and television artistes at regular intervals as well as the regular exchange of radio and television programmes have been carried out.

To date, two Asean Seminars on mass media have been held. The Annual Asean Film Festival simultaneously held with the Asean Sub-Committee on films has been able to bring Asean film producers together not only to exchange views with one another but also to find means of using the media of films to promote better understanding among the peoples of Asean. An exchange of mass media representatives to observe and report on mass media operation in Asean member countries was also initiated in 1973. Another positive development,
was the training programme in mass communications which commenced at the Institute of Mass Communications, University of the Philippines in 1974. Similarly in 1975, journalist bodies of the five member countries formed themselves into a Confederation with the aim to promote closer relations, and to cooperate fully in advancing journalism towards a healthy, free and responsible media.

It is hoped that these activities could extend to the exchange of journalists from the various ASEAN countries to work for some months in another ASEAN country. Another item worth mentioning is the Asian Institute for Broadcasting Development in Kuala Lumpur. This institute, which receives 25% of its facilities from IPTAR, the Malaysia Broadcasting Training Institute, has in the past been able to contribute towards the training of many ASEAN mass media personnel.

Of course we still face the problem of reaching audiences in some remote areas where physical communication is not so developed. While we can rely on inter-personal methods of getting the message across, plans to provide accurate communication channels still need to be more clearly defined. As the people generally rely to a large extent on opinion leaders for information, the fear of distortion can never be over-looked and we can never be too sure of the opinions that
are generated this way.

In Malaysia we have launched a new development strategy with national unity as the over-riding objective. A stage has been reached in the nation's economic and social development where the emphasis is on social integration and more equitable distribution of income and opportunities.

Our Third Five Year Plan introduces a more complex and sophisticated dimension of development such as rural credit systems, modernisation of agricultural techniques and injecting industrial breath and activity into new towns. In short it calls for more citizen participation.

The education system has been modernised and expanded, and given an increasing role in moulding civic and national consciousness and spiritual values, as well as upgrading the knowledge and skills required of a developing nation and its growing population.

The agricultural sector --- mainstay of the Malaysian economy --- is being strengthened through significant improvements. The introduction
of a new comprehensive agricultural policy is new being looked into by the government.

The most dynamic growth, however, is being registered by the manufacturing and construction industries. While in the fifties, the manufacturing sector was largely geared to the processing of principal export products of rubber and tin, it developed rapidly in the sixties to encompass the production of an increasing range of manufactured goods initially for home consumption but now extended to export.

With all these changes in the pattern of our social and economic life, the complexities emerging out of such changes has increased manifold. Our people are now exposed to a more complex life and their expectations and demands have equally increased. The mass media therefore has to accept this challenge of satisfying their greater expectations and should spare no effort in their search for new, better and more sophisticated skills and media tools for this purpose.

Ladies and gentlemen, I can go on and on, but I am not here to impress you with Malaysia's string of impressive records. In short, what I would like to stress is that the process of nation building in
Malaysia has been incorporated into a more co-ordinated and integrated agenda for development. An agenda that will enable us to emerge as a nation peaceful, stable, prosperous and united/in Southeast Asia.

In support of our massive development efforts we would need more than the backing of the entire Government communication machinery. We would need the active, enlightened support of specialists in the private sector. In other words, the press, the advertising industry, the film industry and public relations organizations and others have an important part to play.

Communication planning in Malaysia has a two pronged approach:

The first: To give support to the national effort for socio-economic development;

The second: To utilise the whole gambit of our communication network to help in the process of socialisation.
I am proud to say that by and large we in Malaysia enjoy the supportive role of the media in our planning. To this end much has been achieved because our communication media has done its best to keep pace with our national aspirations.

Once society opens its eyes to what its neighbours are doing, particularly in the way of ASEAN programmes, it would certainly lead on to greater dimensions. The trend for other countries to initiate dialogues with ASEAN has already begun and each day brings more requests from others. The forthcoming Inter-Governmental Conference on Communication Policies in Asia and Oceania which will be held in Kuala Lumpur between the 5th and 14th February, 1979 is again a strong indicator of keen interest in media problems for this region.

It is expected that Kuala Lumpur will during this period be transformed into a place of congregation for media specialists from not only ASEAN countries but countries from the rest of the world.

There is no doubt that the deliberation and exchange of ideas during this conference would bring about new ideas, concepts and
experiences to all of us while on the other hand, incidentally providing excellent opportunities for the rest of the world to have a closer look at Asean and its mass media concepts.

Ladies, and gentlemen, we could spend considerable time discussing the extent to which our societies depend upon communication and upon the ability of men to communicate with each other, and we could go into some detail on the problems of basic communication.

However, for the purposes of your deliberations I would like to leave with you some of my thoughts that may be helpful.

Firstly: Communication contributes to a feeling of nation-ness; it acts as a voice of national planning and helps the people to pay their role as a nation among nations.

Secondly: In developing nations (and that is all of us) the mass media develops almost simultaneously with the new awareness of the outside world and a new national consciousness.
Thirdly: Mass communication can be used either as a stimulant or tranquilizer for the well-being of our national organ.

Fourthly: It is absolutely essential and critical in our different societies that we should be able to communicate freely and openly with one another.

Finally: The rapid race of national development calls for the co-ordinated and reinforced use of both the impersonal mass media and the more personal, face-to-face pattern of communication.

With that ladies and gentlemen I have great pleasure in declaring this seminar open. And to those visiting delegates I say: 'Selamat Datang and Selamat Bersidang'.