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INAUGURATING SPEECH

by

MS. KAYOKO MIZUTA

DEPUTY EXECUTIVE SECRETARY, UNITED NATIONS ESCAP

Seminar on “Media And Human Rights In Asia”

(Bangkok, 24 – 28 November 1999)

Distinguished guests,
Dear participants,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is indeed a special pleasure for me to address you today at this forum in the heart of Bangkok, the City of Angels, which hosted the 1993 Asia-Pacific Regional Conference in Preparation for the World Conference on Human Rights. That conference adopted the Bangkok Declaration on Human Rights.

We are living through a time of great promise and change as the world is preparing itself to enter the new Millenium. The twentieth century has witnessed both the best and the worst of human endeavour. It is in this century that the United Nations was born and together with it were the fundamental principles of human rights, for equal rights of men and women, and equality between nations big and small, as well as between individuals of all languages, beliefs, cultures and colours.
Human rights are difficult to define but perhaps they are rights that any person has as a human being. They are 'what reason requires and conscience commands', as aptly stated in 1998 by the Secretary-General of the United Nations on the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is commonly recognized that human rights are the firm foundations of human existence and coexistence; that human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent; and that human rights lie at the heart of all that the United Nations was created for and aspires to achieve in peace and development.

It should be reaffirmed that all human rights are equally important, from civil and political to social, economic and cultural rights and the right to development. The right to development is of special concern to UN-ESCAP who is mandated to promote economic and social development in the Asian and Pacific region. It is the measure of the respect of all other human rights. At the same time, for each human right, there are corresponding duties and responsibilities for each entity, the government, the community or the individual. These are duties and responsibilities to respect, protect, promote and fulfil human rights.

Properly understood and justly interpreted, human rights are therefore alien to no culture and native to all countries. It is the
universal values of human rights that give them strength and the
c power to cross borders and beliefs, and to defy any force. It is for
these human rights that the United Nations is engaged in
securing the basic conditions of life, in ensuring peace,
development, a safe environment, food, shelter, education,
participation, equal opportunities and protection against war,
hunger and intolerance in any form.

In Asia, human rights protection and promotion are again
being brought to fore in the wake of the recent economic and
social crisis. The crisis has threatened to undermine decades of
hard-earned development. It has pushed millions into
unemployment and underemployment and large sections of the
population deeper into poverty. The crisis has affected
everyone. Among those hardest hit are the vulnerable and
disadvantaged groups, including the rural poor, women, children,
older persons and persons with disabilities. On the other hand,
the crisis has also offered valuable opportunities to reflect on the
need for the immediate realization of human rights, including the
right to development and the rights of the vulnerable. One of the
most important lessons learned from the crisis is that the rights of
citizens to food, housing, social security, education, health and
work, among others, cannot be postponed. They need to be
addressed here and now.
We are happy to note that over the past 50 years or so, the body of international human rights law has been substantially expanded. They form a normative system and common standards of achievements in the field of human rights for nations to strive for, whether they are rich or poor, industrialized or developing. The normative work is largely done. The task for us all, in the years to come, is to implement the well-established legal obligations, turning the spirit and letters of such human rights standards into reality. It is imperative to incorporate international human rights into national legal systems and to enforce them at all levels, making these rights justiciable and providing remedies for victims of human rights abuses and sanctions for the perpetrators of such violations.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In this age of satellite communication and electronic information superhighways, it is well recognized that no concept, however noble, can be of social significance unless communicated accurately and in time to as wide an audience and in as convincing a manner as possible. Public awareness of and action for human rights are essential. As journalists, writers, media experts and people who interact with the media, you are the guardians of human rights and the torch-bearers of
democracy. The future of human rights relies on your vigilance and efforts.

Human rights education is a powerful tool in your hands for the elimination of human rights violations and for building free and just societies. Unlike other sectors, the media can reach the unreachable groups of society, including the poor and people living in rural and remote areas. The media is also powerful in:

1. promoting knowledge through providing information about human rights;
2. harnessing values and attitudes through promoting a human rights culture;
3. inducing action through encouraging people to defend human rights and prevent human rights abuses.

The media, by reporting on what they have seen, witnessed, and learned, play a key role in alerting public opinion. It helps meet the basic needs for and right to information of citizens alongside the right to freedom of opinion and expression. Many incidences of human rights violation have been brought to light and documented in recent years by the news media. In many cases, news reports have served to set in motion mechanisms or procedures for putting an end to human rights violations.
In 1988, the World Public Information Campaign for Human Rights was launched by the United Nations in its resolution 43/128 with the aim of increasing understanding of human rights and fundamental freedoms and educating the public on the international machinery for the promotion and protection of human rights. We will be in a few days celebrating the International Human Rights Day, 10 December in the midst of the United Nations Decade for Human Education (1995-2004).

As we stand on the threshold of the new millennium, we are confronted by many challenges, both new and old. We face the profound challenges of the emerging forces and forms of globalization. The various forms of media and the new information technologies have fuelled the widespread and rapid promotion of ideas and values at all levels. The information revolution may deepen existing inequality between countries and among individuals. At the same time, the crucial challenge remains to be how to provide accurate media representation of world issues and unbiased objective reporting.

As the century closes, let us pledge ourselves to the protection and promotion of all human rights for all. Let us work together to build free and equitable societies where each human being is given the opportunity and the means to develop his/her potential to the fullest. Let us work hand in hand throughout the
journey to the enjoyment of human rights by all, regardless of their gender, race, tongue, age and belief.

Finally, I would like to thank the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre for giving me the opportunity to be here with you today. I wish the Seminar all success.

Thank you for your attention.