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Welcome Address

Symposium on Facilitating Asian Media in Promoting a Culture of Peace
December 4-6, Manila, Philippines

Drs. Anura Goonasekera

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. On behalf of the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC for short), I welcome you to this three-day symposium on Facilitating Asian Media in Promoting a Culture of Peace. This symposium is organized by AMIC in collaboration with the Global Society for Peace and Development in Manila. It is sponsored by the Japan Foundation Asia Centre in Tokyo and UNESCO Regional Office in Kuala Lumpur.

This symposium brings together researchers, media practitioners and religious representatives from seven countries in Asia. These are India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines and Sri Lanka. During the coming three days you will examine many important questions about the role of mass media in promoting peace. These include the possible ways in which mass media can be effectively used to promote a culture of peace; whether guidelines can be developed for media coverage of conflict and violence; mechanisms for continuous dialogue among Asian institutes engaged in propagation and preservation of peace.

In recent years the world witnessed momentous political changes. The cold war has just ended with the dismantling of the Soviet Union. These changes provided a big boost for capitalist, free market economies and were heralded by some commentators as a victory for the political ideology of multi-party democracy. Many believed that the end of the cold war would herald an era of global peace and prosperity. However such beliefs were illusory. New conflicts arose in the former East European countries. Nationalism based on ethnic and religious identities, which were contained under the earlier communist regimes, began to reassert itself with a force that caused immense concern across the world. Multiparty democracies gave an impetus to the creation of ethnic constituencies. The comforting belief held by western countries that they had overcome wars based on ethnicity and racial loyalties were shattered by the violent
ethno-religious wars in Bosnia and Kosovo. Wars triggered by ethnic rivalries took centre stage in the world arena. Wars in Chechnya, Rwanda, Somalia, Liberia, Kosovo and Sierra Leone created diasporic communities unparalleled in history. International media were packed with these events.

Furthermore, the media of communication in some of these countries became actors in these conflicts. A new phenomenon of media nationalism arose in the newly emergent democracies in Asia. The media were systematically used as tools of propaganda, either by the government or by opposition parties. Nationalism as a new state ideology prevented the media from democratizing. Political and economic restructuring of the media, particularly broadcasting, established nationalistic, politicized and quasi-commercial media systems that were subordinate to the state or nationalist ideologues. Consequently, public accountability took a back seat.

We see in many countries an increasing penetration of the nation state into the sphere of mass media, thereby limiting the independence of the media and their critical role. There are a number of reasons for such a nationalistic media policy. A highly ideologised political scene, historic struggle against colonialism, nationalistic policies of new governments in multi-ethnic states, economic underdevelopment, absence of market economy, need to protect national culture, legal vacuums and ideological opposition to indiscriminate privatization are some of the main reasons for the emergence of media nationalism.

Most conflicts that took the centre stage in world politics were not between states or countries. They were between people living in the same country. These were civil wars or ethno-religious wars among the same people. Such wars were not within the traditional ambit of international relations. These were considered internal matters of the countries concerned. The international understanding favoured this position. Only with the consent of the governments of the countries concerned could the international community intervene. While such civil conflicts were becoming endemic in some parts of the world, in other parts of the world these were receding. The momentous changes in Eastern Europe following the restructuring and opening of the Soviet Union was achieved relatively peacefully. So was the demise of the policy of apartheid in South Africa, the end of Marcos’s dictatorship in the Philippines and the incorporation of former communist rivals to the Association of South East Asian
Nations (ASEAN). In some countries, such as the Philippines, a new type of
diplomacy, based on citizen activism was making waves. New methods, strategies and
philosophies for preventing civil conflicts were being tested out in these countries.
Often civil society organizations were leading this movement.

Undoubtedly the media had an important role to play in all this. But what exactly was
it? This is what we are going to discuss during the next three days. In order to
understand the role of media we should look at media as a component of a social
system in a country. Communication media is a sub-system of society, just like other
sub-systems such as the economy, the polity and the judiciary. There are interactions
among these sub-systems. The mass media could relate to the political system and
even become its appendage. The media could also relate closely with the economy
and thereby work in step with market forces. The media can be examined in terms of
these systemic relations. Such an analysis is not problematic when we look at single
societies or nation states. However, when we look at communication across national
borders that are at an international level we will need additional conceptual
assumptions. For here we are looking at interrelations among different countries in
different parts of the globe. If we are to look at this as a social process and take a
systems view, then, logically, we have to begin by hypothesizing a world system of
social relationships. Communication media at this level of analysis will be
components of this world system, with its own sub-systems of power, commerce,
trade and international law. The fears of domination and aggression by powerful
nations arise out of these international relationships. Media nationalism that was
referred to earlier then becomes a dangerous reality to contend with. To take a recent
example from Asia: how did the mass media in India and Pakistan behave when the
two countries exploded nuclear devices. The media called it tit-for-tat tests. Popular
opinion in both countries showed enormous support for the governments that ordered
the tests. Any opinion about the enormity of the dangers involved was drowned by the
cries of jubilation. Where sanity would have dictated condemnation, national pride
dictated rejoicing. “Prepare for war if you want peace” became the demagogue’s
battle cry. The nuclear tests by India and Pakistan showed that the voice of reason
could easily be orphaned. Education and communication for peace are sorely needed
in many parts of Asia.
The events following the nuclear tests also showed that communicating peace would rarely come from the traditional sources of public education such as the press, radio, television and the schools. Furthermore the government, industry and the market will not step into provide the necessary education for peace. It is not in their interests to do so. Then who will do this?

The US management guru Peter Drucker has pointed out that apart from the government, industry and the market all societies need another important player. These are the Civil Society organizations or Non-profit, non-government organizations. He called this the Third Force. "The State tends to define a problem in a standard way and then monopolises the solution. With its singular profit motive of course the market simply has no interest or capacity to cope with social problems". (Sunday Times, June 7, 1998 P.34, Singapore). The strength of civil society organizations is community involvement. Drucker argues that across the Asian region social tensions are so high that it reminds one of Europe before it descended into two world wars. When social tensions are high it does not take much more than an accident to set things off. Nuclear weapons in the hands of leaders of countries in unsettled conditions are not a thing for rejoicing but is a cause of immense worry. This is an area that needs systematic research and study. The significance of this symposium cannot be overemphasized.

There are very few studies done in Asia about the role of media in creating and maintaining peace. In this connection I would like to briefly mention some of the findings of a recent study conducted by my organization AMIC and the Sasakawa Peace foundation of Japan (SPF). The overall objective of the study was to explore the role of media in creating ethnic peace in selected Asian countries. The countries are India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, The Philippines, Singapore, and Sri Lanka. Eminent researchers from these countries conducted the studies. Prof. J.B. Disanayaka, who is present here today, coordinated the Sri Lanka study. The findings of study was published in 1999 as a monograph titled "Mass Media and Cultural Identity: Ethnic Reporting in Asia" by Pluto Press of London.

The contribution of communication media needs to be understood in the context of historical and socio-political factors amidst which the media operate. Reporting in the media is not necessarily about the coverage of 'objective' events. It is also the coverage of the subjective interpretation of significant events and behaviours that
affect a nation's status, rights and resources. One clear outcome of these subjective interpretations is media nationalism, which was mentioned earlier in this presentation. While many commentators look up to the mass media to help in the resolution of differences among nations and bring about peaceful resolution to contentious issues, the main findings of this study show that the mass media by itself is helpless in doing this. Differences among nations have their roots in history and deep-seated prejudices and fears sometimes nurtured by a culture of intolerance. Without political will, harmonious relations among nations will be extremely difficult to maintain. Many a time the political will required to maintain peace is weakened by geo-political interests of those who wield state power.

I would like to mention a few words about culture and peace. Culture is about meaning. Culture is a result of a specifically human need to make sense out of the world. Human beings are meaning searching, meaning creating, and meaning negotiating creatures. We act on the interpretation of meanings. All human beings communicate on the basis of symbols and meaning. All human societies use language to communicate. Interpretation and negotiation of meaning is universal and central to human behaviour. In this respect we are unique among animals. We interpret, in our own minds, the expectations of the other, before we communicate with the other. "To speak I have to be somehow already in communication with the mind that I am to address before I start speaking... I have to sense something in the other person's mind to which my own utterance can relate. Human communication is never one-way. Always it not only calls for a response but is shaped in its very form and content by anticipated response" (Ong, 1982: 175-76). This does not mean that a person can be certain as to how the other would respond to what he/she says. But in order to communicate meaningfully a person should be able to conjecture a possible range of responses at least in some vague way. In other words for meaningful behaviour to take place in human society people should be able to "predict" each other's behaviour reasonably well. Socialization in a given culture is the main source of such predictability. Socialization is the dynamic process that allows people to develop a self-identity. It is through socialization that a person develops the ability to be an object to himself/herself. Central to the development of self is our unique capacity to carry on an inner conversation with ourselves - what George Herbert Mead called a conversation between the "I" and the "Me". Because of their ability to interact with
themselves, allowing them to examine and choose possible courses of action, people are able to modify or alter the meanings and symbols that are given to them by society. Not only do we communicate with ourselves and with other humans around us, we also have a need to communicate with transcendental powers. We act in relation to a cosmological environment. In dealing with human beings we are dealing with subjects that seek communication and contact with the extraordinary, with the transcendental powers, imputing charisma to them and to others. This propensity is rooted in the neural constitution of human organism. The intensity with which it is experienced and the power of its motivation will be influenced by the prevailing culture and by situational exigencies. However the need for intuitive, transcendental communication is a unique characteristic present in all human communities. This intertwined patterns of communicative action and interaction, comprising inner communication; societal communication and "transcendental" communication make up groups, institutions and societies. Culture is therefore not simply values. It is how we internalize and change these values. Culture is a temporal process. It is an activity which brings about a continuing transformation of the old into the new, the foreign into the indigenous.

What has this got to do with peace? Peace cannot exist apart from us. Peace is not a thing that exists outside for us to reach and grab. Peace has to be within us. In my view it will be very difficult for us to bring about peace among others. Not even the mightiest among us can command peace among others. We should be at peace with ourselves. It is only by doing this, as individuals, can we hope to create a culture of peace. This is where I think religious philosophies, can be of help. Peace is an idea. And ideas we know have changed the world. There are those among us who may believe that ideas are just a superstructure built on material foundations such as the economy and power. It is even asserted that the dominant ideas are the ideas of the dominant class. If we believe this then ideas will not have any power of their own to bring about change among humans. However our history is full of examples where people have been moved to do great things on the basis of ideas and beliefs. All the great religions have left us with the results of their beliefs and ideas. Some of these like Borobudur, the Taj Mahal and the pyramids are wonders of the world. We know that nations have gone to war because ideas and beliefs. People have stopped wars and prosecuted peace again because of beliefs and ideas. Creating a culture of peace
therefore requires the propagation of ideas. These ideas must become meaningful to the people for whom they are meant. The ideas must help people to make sense of the world in which they live. Religious philosophies, I believe, have an important role to play in all this.

The subject of this symposium covers very complex terrain. During the next three days we will all go deeper into the issues involved. We will focus on not only the general issues of media, culture and peace, but also specific concerns of the countries represented here. I wish the symposium every success.