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Welcome Address by Vijay Menon, AMIC Secretary-General

Mr. Zainon Ahmad, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome all of you to Kuala Lumpur and to this seminar on "Media Ethics in Asia". We have participants from eight Asian countries besides the UK and U.S.

The debate on media ethics is not new. In fact, in the last decade, AMIC has organized seminars on media ethics in South Asia, and related topics, such as Media Monitors in Asia and Media Regulations for the New Times. But the media scene is an ever-changing one, and the debate on ethics has gained in intensity in recent years.

There is more talk now of a need for standards, more discussion of reporters and their sources; of deception and misrepresentation; of incompetence and irresponsibility. And, in the electronic age, the new media provide an added dimension to the debate.

I recall that several years ago, a senior Indian journalist had suggested that a code be devised for the press. He felt that, if adhered to, the code would liberate the press, not encage it. It would have the virtue that any authority attacking a person adhering to the code would at once put itself in the wrong and at once vindicate the person.

An Indonesian journalist's retort to this was brief and forceful. "I think," he said, all this (about) a press code being able to liberate and not encage the press sounds rather esoteric in the context of the reality prevailing in many countries of the Third World...Let's face it. The government is omnipotent; the press is emasculated."

The government view was articulated by the Malaysian Prime Minister in an address to the Confederation of ASEAN Journalists. This was several years ago. But the Prime Minister's views do not appear to have changed and they bear repeating. "The Press, he said, is not an institution created in heaven, naturally bestowed with virtue. It is not the unique kingdom of the virtuous. It is made up of and run by men who are moved, like other men, not only by high ideals, but also by base needs and feelings."

"The ability of the journalist to influence the course of events, is out of all proportion to his individual rights as a citizen of a democratic society. He is neither especially chosen for his moral superiority nor elected to his post. A free press is prone to corruption, as are the other institutions in a democracy. Is this then the only institution in a democracy to be completely unfettered?"

Justice Michael Kirby of Australia, speaking at an AMIC seminar in Kuala Lumpur, articulated a jurist's concern at the power of the media: Some will say that the law, national and international, cannot stand up against the powerful combination of new technology and the opinionated ownership of the media...But if the rule of law is to survive this challenge, we must find the answers which will render the global media accountable to the government of laws, not of men...The media technology, which is such a potential liberator can, in the hands of a powerful few, bestride the narrow world like a colossus. It can do irretrievable wrongs to individuals. It can diminish linguistic and cultural diversity. It can reduce large issues to froth and bubble. And it can challenge the rule of law itself.

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Theodore Peterson who articulated the widely-accepted social responsibility theory of the press, wrote that "the major premise" of the social responsibility theory is that "freedom carries concomitant obligations; and the press, which enjoys a privileged position...is obliged to be responsible to society for carrying out certain essential functions of mass communication in contemporary society". But, twenty five years later, he commented that "the ethic that has developed is an unreasoned ethic without a philosophical base".

It is our expectation that this meeting with so many distinguished participants from across the region and beyond 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. 29 years of service to communication in 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. The NTU is a principal benefactor. This seminar, and the book to follow, are assisted by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency.

We are grateful to all of you for joining us this morning to formally inaugurate this important seminar. 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 Mr. Zainon Ahmad and the National Press Club, our local partner, for this seminar.

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