

OPENING ADDRESS

3rd ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly (AIPA) Caucus
01 June 2001
House of Representatives, Quezon City

Speaker Feliciano Belmonte, Jr.

Beloved colleagues and AIPA Secretary General Antonio Veloso Cuenco, honorable Members of the ASEAN Parliaments, AIPA Officers, ladies and gentlemen.

I welcome you to the Republic of the Philippines and to the House of Representatives.

Today, we fulfill our duty to the peoples of the ASEAN region by meeting in caucus. In the next three days, we shall discuss, and hopefully agree on how to resolve various problems that beset our nations, including those that stand in our way towards building an ASEAN community.

Two problems gain prominence at this juncture in our history: disaster management and children's welfare.

The devastation that visited our neighboring country, Japan, recently calls attention to the necessity of preparing for disaster. This should especially find resonance among us, considering that each of our nation has, at one time or another, been at the eye of disaster. Tsunamis have wrecked havoc in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, typhoons cyclones and flooding have become perennial challenges in Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam, Lao and the Philippines. Brunei Darussalam had to contend with wildfires, while epidemics have crossed regional, borders, affecting almost all our countries, including Singapore.

Our regions with geophysical characteristics have indeed predisposed our peoples to the perils of disasters. Unfortunately, experts from the scientific community agree that the perils we face will become more acute and pronounced as global warming intensifies. Unpredictable rainfalls, intemperate weather and heatwaves, alternating droughts and flooding, inundations and rising sea levels, saltwater intrusions, and climate-sensitive diseases such as malaria and malnutrition are only some of the challenges that our societies will have to confront as a result of the climactic changes brought about by global warming.

These burdens, while undoubtedly felt at our local societies, demand a concerted regional response. The intimate physical space we inhabit and the common geological features of our lands, among others, link together our fates and provide

a compelling case for our cooperation and joint endeavour in the area of disaster management and mitigation.

The same is required of us in the area of children's welfare. According to the US Department of Statistics, over 200,000 women and children in Southeast Asia fall prey to trafficking. A still significant number become child combatants, or are otherwise affected by the various conflicts that rage across our region. Still others are forced into labor at an early age because of poverty and destitution, or are otherwise deprived of the opportunity to learn, or even to live in dignity and with the nourishment and care appropriate for their age.

These dark realities underscore a blatant irony in our community. For a while, we affirm in unison the deepest concern for our children as reflected in our ratification of various international instruments that seek to guarantee their rights, including the international convention on the rights of a child which every aipa nation has signed, our institutions yet struggle to transform our legal commitments into everyday social realities.

As representatives of the peoples of this region, it is our legal obligation and moral duty not onl to discuss these concerns. Among a host of other issues or regional import, but to explore a regional concensus on how to proceed henceforth and solve these problems.

In the past, ASEAN has received criticism for proceeding cautiously towards regional integration. All through these years, we have marched steadily towards an ASEAN community. While other regional groupings struggle to keep theirs intact, through consensus-building, we have slowly but firmly estalished the foundations of our regional community.

Today, we build on that foundation by coming together in a caucus to explore and find ways to forge mutual cooperation on areas of common concern. By sharing our experiences and expertise, and by exchanging ideas on those matters that implicate the future of our peoples, we will be able to appreciate more our diversity, gain respect for the unique attributes that set each of our country apart, and find a common ground upon which we shall base our concerted and collective action.

I welcome you all today with great confidence that we will achieve the goals we set out to fulfill a nd accomplish for this caucus, and in the process, further extend the avenues of cooperation among our contries, and thereby promote, the lofty aims of the ASEAN.

Thank you and mabuhay!