

Opening Remarks by

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**ASEAN Anniversary Forum: Building A People-Oriented ASEAN Community –
Challenges and Opportunities**

Institute of Diplomacy & Foreign Relations (IDFR)

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Your Excellency Ambassador Abdullah Faiz Zain

Yang Berbahagia Tan Sri, Dato'-Dato',

Excellencies Ambassadors, High Commissioners,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

1. Allow me to begin by thanking the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR) and Institute of ASEAN Studies and Global Affairs (INSPAG), University Teknologi Mara (UiTM) for inviting me to address this forum in conjunction with the 43rd anniversary of ASEAN.

2. I am happy that IDFR and INSPAG have continued with the tradition of celebrating the ASEAN anniversary with a public discourse on the future of ASEAN. This Forum demonstrates the close collaboration between the government and academic sector in supporting the policies of ASEAN at the national and regional level.

3. I would also like to take this opportunity to congratulate IDFR UiTM for signing MoU on 25th June 2010 to enhance cooperation in training and research. I sincerely hope that the MoU would result in more joint activities that would benefit stakeholders in both institutions.

4. The title of the Forum is *Building A People-Oriented ASEAN Community – Challenges and Opportunities*. This is in line with one of the purposes of the ASEAN

Charter, namely, to promote a people-oriented ASEAN Community. This concept seeks to encourage the active participation of all sectors of the society in the process of ASEAN integration and community building. With five years remaining to the realization of an ASEAN Community, such a task is indeed daunting. While ASEAN has laid down the necessary roadmap and blueprints to achieve this objective, there is still much to be done especially at the national level. The convening of this forum is a small but crucial step as part of the overall efforts to increase public awareness of ASEAN. I sincerely hope that more programmes of a similar nature can be organized in the future.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

5. The challenges of building a people-oriented ASEAN community are manifold. One of the main challenges is to create a sense of belonging, a sense of “we feeling” particularly at the grassroots level. The level of awareness on ASEAN at this level is still lacking and varies considerably amongst ASEAN Member States. Many people do not know what ASEAN means – what more about its history and achievements for the past 43 years.

6. The effort to increase the level of awareness has not been easy for the ASEAN Member States, as they have to address other challenges such as economic growth and development, as well as security problems at the domestic level. Existing public diplomacy road shows targeting schools and communities of ASEAN Member States are neither consistent nor adequate due to financial, structural and other constraints. The challenge of undertaking a more focused, sustained and committed approach aimed at this younger generation is critical since they represent the future beneficiary of the ASEAN Community initiative.

7. ASEAN too, despite its achievements, has been frequently referred to by critics as an elitist governments’ club that lacks the involvement of its people at the grass roots in its decision making processes. As such, there is a need for the governments of ASEAN to further engage the civil society, private sector, as well as non-governmental organizations on issues which have direct and indirect on the political and socio-economic stability of the region.

8. Another major obstacle in realizing a people-oriented ASEAN Community is in narrowing the development gaps among ASEAN Member States. True regional integration will require all countries to achieve a minimum standard of economic and social development which will benefit all sectors of society. Here the lack of success of the various ASEAN Growth Triangle projects is pertinent to look at. In-depth studies need to be conducted to identify the cause and find solutions to make the projects more appealing to the ASEAN business community. The scope of incentives being offered within the existing Growth Triangles needs to be revisited to keep the community abreast with new developments in order to allow them to remain competitive and relevant.

9. The onus of building a people-oriented ASEAN Community does not rest solely on the government but also on the private sector as well. Indeed, there is a need for the governments of ASEAN to initiate and facilitate more robust private sector engagements in ASEAN-wide 'community social responsibility' (CSR) initiatives aimed at adding value to the ASEAN Community concept. ASEAN's current decision-making process needs to be readjusted to accommodate the sectors' potentially strategic contribution in the initiative.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

10. In realizing a truly people-oriented ASEAN Community, it is important for ASEAN to further enhance its connectivity at all levels. A well-connected ASEAN, from its transportation networks to its peoples, will contribute towards a more competitive and resilient ASEAN. Focus should be directed towards enhancing people-to-people, business-to-business and people-to-government connectivity. This interlocking web of connectivity should serve as the foundation that supports and facilitates the various integration initiatives in ASEAN.

11. Some progress has been achieved in these areas in the last four decades. More aggressive and innovative measures should be undertaken to build on existing mechanisms and optimize available opportunities for the benefit of the people of ASEAN. The ASEAN Community project must be inclusive and also people driven if it is to succeed.

12. As we are all aware, ASEAN is currently developing a Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity. The Master Plan on hopefully contribute towards enhancing infrastructure linkages, trade, investments, tourism, cultural integration and information communication technology in the region as well as enhance people-to-people contact. There remain substantial opportunities for more concerted regional efforts in this regard.

13. In creating an ASEAN Community that is people-oriented, education should be given priority. Education lies at the core of ASEAN's development process, creating a knowledge-based society and contributing to the enhancement of ASEAN competitiveness. In this regard, the incorporation of ASEAN studies into secondary and tertiary level curriculum of Member States should be encouraged, towards enhancing awareness of ASEAN Community among youths who will become the future leaders of ASEAN.

14. Even though ASEAN has accomplished a lot in the past years, a number of things are still left to be desired. Effective coordination at the implementation level is crucial. There is an urgent need for Member States to properly address this issue to ensure that the people would reap full benefits from any initiatives that are undertaken.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

15. ASEAN Community building initiative is still a "work in progress" but it is definitely on the right track. Challenges are numerous and complex, but opportunities are also abundant. Whether this objective can be materialized will depend on how these challenges are transformed into opportunities and how the opportunities are fully utilized.

16. ASEAN Member States in this connection should give prominence to the activities and programmes that have a direct impact on the people. This would enable their citizenry to see the relevance of ASEAN in their daily lives. I believe that unless the shared goals and vision of Member States meets the hearts and minds of their respective citizens, the goal of a people-centered ASEAN Community will very much remain a dream.

17. It is my fervent hope that our forum today will be able to generate implementable ideas that would certainly contribute towards the building of a people-oriented ASEAN Community.

Thank you.