

EMBARGOED TILL AFTER DELIVERY
PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

SPEECH BY PRESIDENT S R NATHAN AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE 8TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE ASEAN LAW ASSOCIATION ON SATURDAY, 29TH NOVEMBER 2003 AT 9 AM

Excellencies

Distinguished guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am happy to be here this morning to officiate at the opening ceremony of the 8th General Assembly of the ASEAN Law Association.

On behalf of the people of Singapore, I would like to extend a warm welcome to all of you for participating in this meeting which brings together the cream of legal minds in ASEAN. I am confident that all of you will find the discussions at this meeting intellectually stimulating, and your attendance worthwhile and memorable.

Almost 25 years have gone by since your Association was founded in Jakarta by lawyers from ASEAN's founding member countries. Its establishment reflected the founders' fundamental belief in the important role that Law plays in the affairs of ASEAN. Singapore has always wholeheartedly supported the sentiments that underlie the founding of your Association. They are as important and valid now as they were at the time your Association was established.

ASEAN has progressed much since 1979. ASEAN has now expanded to twice the number of members that it had at its founding. With 10 member states, there is now a greater diversity of legal systems and legal traditions. In turn, this means a greater challenge for your Association, as the need to expand the horizons of your focus and programmes to encompass a greater diversity of laws and legal systems becomes even more urgent.

Apart from ASEAN being now a much larger and more diverse grouping of nations, its character as a regional grouping has also changed substantially. The initial nature of security concerns that dominated the region at the time of its establishment has taken new dimensions in nature and scope. However, today, ASEAN member states are more concerned with achieving the goals of improving the economic well-being of their peoples. But these goals have to be achieved within the context of an increasingly interconnected and globalised world where national borders no longer restrict the flow of people and ideas, let alone goods and services.

It is in this very changed context that the ASEAN Law Association must seek to remain relevant. Although not explicitly stated in your Constitution,

central to your objectives is the strengthening of ASEAN as a group of nations. ASEAN cannot play an effective role in the world nor improve the lives of its peoples, if member states are not able to work together effectively, under agreed legal rules and principles that are universally applicable to all its members. Unfortunately, diversities of language, culture, governance systems and applicable laws as they now exist, do not make it easy to achieve that end. To understand each other and work together in harmony, rules that govern relationships need to be universal and their legal provisions spelt out clear for all to understand and observe.

This is where your Association can make a significant contribution. Your Association comprises lawyers from all sectors of the legal fraternities. They include Judges, lawyers in the Public Services,

lawyers in private law firms, corporate counsel as well as law academics from the many law schools in ASEAN. By providing a forum for lawyers of ASEAN to get together, your Association thus facilitates our learning about each other's laws and legal systems, besides developing personal friendships among lawyers. By your interacting, you contribute in a substantial way to the strengthening of ASEAN's framework of legal rules and principles that facilitate regional bonding.

Beyond providing closer relations and mutual understanding among the lawyers of ASEAN, your Association is best placed to spearhead the effort at harmonisation of the different laws of the ASEAN member states, and in particular in the area of trade law. Harmonising the legal rules applicable to trans-national commercial transactions would remove one of the costly barriers to the enhancement of trade. In this respect,

your Association can draw from the experience of the various programmes that are internationally available, and undertake to promote greater mutual understanding on the need to arrive at the harmonisation of the region's laws and regulations governing trade and economic interaction.

The last time that a General Assembly of the ASEAN Law Association was held in Singapore was in November 1984. I am happy that after a lapse of nearly 20 years, the General Assembly has returned to Singapore. This General Assembly which was originally planned to be held earlier this year had to be postponed due to the SARS outbreak. But that unfortunate event has also reminded us of the critical importance of working together, be it to combat a dreaded disease or whatever. Without the co-operation that came about between the member states of ASEAN, it would not have been possible to introduce complementary measures

to contain the SARS outbreak. Had we not worked together, it would have taken us much more time and effort to successfully combat the disease.

I appreciate that the subjects that will occupy your minds during this Assembly will indeed cover a wide spectrum. They include the strengthening of the judicial system of ASEAN member states, legal education, developments in insolvency laws and practice, alternative dispute resolution, electronic commerce, besides the many other difficult issues concerning the World Trade Organisation. All these are very important and highly relevant issues in the globalised world that ASEAN, and the legal fraternities of ASEAN countries, have to operate in. In wishing you all success in your deliberations in the days ahead, I want to assure you that the Singapore Chapter of your Association will contribute its utmost to make this Assembly a success.

On that note, it is now my pleasure to declare open the 8th General Assembly of the ASEAN Law Association.
