

Tenth ASEAN Labour Ministers' Meeting Singapore, 16–17 May 1994

JOINT COMMUNIQUÉ

The 10th ASEAN Labour Ministers' Meeting (ALMM) was held in Singapore from 16 to 17 May 1994. It was preceded by a Senior Labour Officials' Meeting (SLOM) from 13 to 14 May 1994.

2. The 10th ALMM was officially declared open by HE Brigadier-General (NS) Lee Hsien Loong, Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Singapore. The Deputy Prime Minister noted the rapid economic transformation of East Asia, particularly in ASEAN member countries, and the increasing competition among Asian economies for foreign investment. He emphasised the need for ASEAN to stay ahead of its competitors by moving progressively into higher value-added economic activities and by managing key intangible factors, in particular industrial harmony, well. The Deputy Prime Minister also cautioned against fresh attempts by some developed countries to impose their industrial relations systems, values and labour standards on developing countries.

3. The 10th ALMM was attended by HE Pehin Dato Isa Bin Pehin Dato Hj Ibrahim, Minister of Home Affairs of Brunei Darussalam; HE Mr Abdul Latief, Minister of Manpower of the Republic of Indonesia; HE Dato' Lim Ah Lek, Minister of Human Resources of Malaysia; HE Ms Ma. Nieves Roldan Confesor, Secretary of Labour and Employment of the Republic of the Philippines; HE Mr Phaithoon Kaeothong, Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare of the Kingdom of Thailand and HE Dr Lee Boon Yang, Minister for Labour of the Republic of Singapore. HE Dato' Ajit Singh, Secretary-General of ASEAN, was also present.

4. HE Dr Lee Boon Yang, Minister for Labour of the Republic of Singapore and HE Mr Phaithoon Kaeothong, Minister of Labour and Social Welfare of the Kingdom of Thailand, were unanimously elected Chairman and Vice-Chairman respectively.

5. The Ministers expressed satisfaction over the implementation of the recommendations of the 9th ASEAN Labour Ministers' Meeting held in Manila, Philippines from 26 to 27 November 1992.

6. The Ministers expressed their grave concern over the move by some developed countries and International Trade Secretariats (ITSs) to introduce social clauses into international trade agreements, and to use this as a condition for gaining market access by developing countries. The Ministers also expressed their concern that some ITSs are using local trade unions as their proxies to force compliance with ILO labour standards. Such attempts would undermine the competitiveness of developing countries and erode their comparative advantages thereby hurting their economies. Poor economic conditions in the developing countries would have detrimental effects on the social well-being and living standards of their people. This in turn would have adverse consequences on the economies of the developed countries. The Ministers therefore urged the ILO to strongly resist any attempt to introduce new conditionalities that link social clauses and ILO labour standards with market accessibility.

7. The Ministers emphasised that they are not opposed to the application of labour standards and are committed to improving the economic and social well-being of workers. However, they are concerned with the rigid imposition of labour standards and the use of rigid standards to stifle free trade and economic development which constitutes a new form of protectionism.

8. The Ministers are of the view that given their different level of economic development, developing countries should not be pressured to comply with standards which are mainly based on those of the advanced and developed countries. The Ministers called upon the ILO to undertake a review of outdated labour standards as a follow-up of the ILO Director-General Report, taking into account the special circumstances and peculiarities of the developing countries, and be more flexible in the implementation of labour standards. It should give due regard to the overall progress of the social and economic conditions of member states in its assessment of their compliance with ratified ILO conventions.

9. Noting that ILO is celebrating its 75th Anniversary this year, the Ministers extended their warmest greetings and best wishes to the ILO. The Ministers commended the ILO for making significant progress in the promotion of social justice and development which ASEAN has benefitted much. The Ministers noted that the Director-General in his Report to the 81st Session of the ILC has focused his discussions on the future role of the ILO. He commented on the need for the ILO to adapt labour standards setting activities to the real needs of its member states. In this regard, the Ministers called upon the ILO to pursue with greater vigour its efforts and to increase the level of assistance to the developing countries rather than penalising them for their inadequacies in complying fully with ratified ILO conventions.

10. To enable ASEAN to have more effective participation and to better present its collective views on issues of common concern at the ILO, the Ministers strongly supported the Philippine candidature as the ASEAN bid for the Chairmanship of the ILO Governing Body for 1994–1995.

11. The Ministers noted the importance of creating a climate of industrial peace and harmony to achieve economic growth in an increasingly competitive environment. The Ministers therefore endorsed the project proposal on “ASEAN Programme on Industrial Relations”, and called for its immediate implementation as soon as the ILO has finalised the project document.

12. The Ministers further noted that the economic success of nations would increasingly depend on the quality of their labour force. It is therefore important that workers in ASEAN continually upgrade their skills level to meet the challenges of a more competitive global environment. In this regard, the Ministers agreed that the “ASEAN Regional Project on Human Resources Development Planning” which was endorsed at the 9th ASEAN Labour Ministers’ Meeting, should focus on human resource development planning strategies with the view to enhance skills development of workers in ASEAN. The Ministers also endorsed Malaysia as host of the first ASEAN Skills Competition in 1995.

13. The Ministers adopted the following Mission Statement of the ASEAN Subcommittee on Labour Affairs (ASCLA) to guide ASEAN cooperation in the field of labour and human resource development:

To promote socio-economic development and stability in the region through the implementation of regional cooperative programmes to help bring about industrial harmony, higher productivity, the efficient use of human resources, greater employment opportunities and an enhanced quality of life for the workers.

14. The Ministers expressed deep appreciation to the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand for the offer to host the 11th ASEAN Labour Ministers’ Meeting in 1996.

15. The delegations of Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand expressed their sincere appreciation to the Government and the people of the Republic of Singapore for their warm hospitality and the excellent arrangements made for the Meeting.

16. The Meeting was held in the traditional spirit of ASEAN cordiality and solidarity.

SOURCE: Ministry of Labour, Singapore.