

# DOCUMENTATION

Extract of the Speech by Mr S Dhanabalan, Minister for Foreign Affairs  
and Minister for Culture, Government of Singapore,  
at the 39th Session of the United Nations General Assembly,  
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The gap between the rich and the poor nations will widen rather than narrow.

In order to do anything about this trend, we must face realities. The great economic powers will continue to determine the direction of the international economy. Political independence has not changed the power relationship between big and small, rich and poor.

This reality has to be accepted as the starting point for any action. The world will not change simply because it is unfair. The dilemma which all of us face is how the weak and poor can muster the means of reshaping this international order.

There have been, in my opinion, two general approaches by the poorer countries for breaking out of this cycle of weakness and poverty. The first has been reliance on expanding the network of international organizations, a notion inspired by the big powers themselves when they created the UN system after World War II. Since UNCTAD I in Geneva in 1964, we have had five such meetings, the most recent in Belgrade last year. Over the same period, the Non-Aligned Movement also held their own meetings on economic issues at Dakar, Lima, Delhi, and elsewhere. We have made attempts at UN-sponsored global negotiations between North and South on a new international economic order. This year, the General Assembly will again pass resolutions on economic issues. The record of such attempts, with a few exceptions, is a failure.

A second approach is ideological. There are those who contend that the root cause of the impoverished state of the majority is not merely the structure of the international system, but rather the fact that it is a neo-colonialist and capitalist international system with an exploitive centre sucking wealth from an exploited periphery. Revolution, according to this viewpoint, will set us free. This is a fallacy. The belief that the common interests of the working class would transcend national boundaries and that class struggle would replace the struggle between states and consequently lead to an era of harmony and co-operation has proven to be obviously false.

As the peoples of Cambodia and so many other countries have found to their cost, there is no superior virtue in one kind of ideological system or another. Starvation, misery, and poverty do not

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discriminate on the basis of ideology or recognize the class principle. Socialists exploit each other too. The socialist international system is also divided into an exploited periphery and an exploitive centre. All Third World countries, regardless of social system or political belief, must recognize this fact. Not to do so is to invite exploitation by what is just another kind of imperialism. Ideology, no more than moral outrage or wishful thinking, cannot alter the political structure or exorcise economic realities.

This is not a philosophy of despair. Realism for the small and the weak does not only consist of accepting constraints, but also of recognizing opportunities. We have to accept the existing structure of the international economic and political system. But that structure is a dynamic one in a state of constant evolution. Looking back, it is evident to me that the small and the weak have succeeded when they have had the will, ability and flexibility to take advantage of opportunities thrown up by the changing pattern of relations between the strong. We have to learn to use the existing structure of the international economic system to change that structure in order to break the vicious cycle of poverty and to secure a better life for our peoples.

How can this be done? Large international organizations that mobilize Third World countries, such as the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77, can provide the political strength to achieve tangible results if skilfully guided. Together the Third World can do what none of its members has the strength to do individually. But, for the most part, both the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77 encompass too many diverse and conflicting interests and irrelevant objectives to act decisively or be constructive. To overcome the weaknesses of such large groupings, we should first organize ourselves into smaller regional groups which share more similar characteristics and common interests. We must create many smaller areas of security and common action in the larger international scene. Such regional groupings can serve as building blocks that would provide a firm foundation for larger international organizations and thus enable these organizations to play a more effective role in furthering the interests of the Third World.

Secondly, we should not allow the progress of our peoples to be hostage to the vanities of nationalism, the blindness of xenophobia or the seductions of ideology. We have to dare to plug into the international economic system because that system is the only source of the capital, technology and management skills that we need to pull ourselves out of poverty. We must admit what we do not know, not in the spirit of submission or dependence, but in order to become independent and meet the challenges of a competitive and evolving international economic system. We must participate in that system, learn its rules and use its rules to our best advantage. We can only do this without undue risk if we are first united.

The above approach is not an academic one. I know this approach can work because it has already worked. The organization to which my country belongs, ASEAN, is in many ways a microcosm of the diversity of the Third World.

It will be difficult to find a more disparate group than Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. We are divided by religion, by system of government, by history, by culture, by ethnicity and by language. In the post-war period, all the present members of ASEAN have, at one time or another, been engaged in conflicts and disputes with each other.

But we have been able to put the past behind us. Historical rivalries have been set aside. Instead, we have emphasized a positive vision of our common future. We have learned to accept each other as

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equals on the basis of our real differences as well as our common interests. We do not live in fear of one another.

The largest member of ASEAN, Indonesia, has played a special role in this respect. Indonesia had not tried to impose its views on the organization, but has worked with all members on the basis of equality and mutual consultation. We have all adopted export-oriented internal economic policies essentially based on market forces. We have not been too proud to learn from others and to allow relatively free inflow of foreign capital, know-how and personnel. We have not allowed destructive ambitions or sterile ideology to divert us from what we regard to be our common interests.

Perhaps most important of all, we have not allowed ASEAN to become a crutch for any of us. Ultimately, we all recognize it is national action that determines national well-being. The basis of collective resilience is national resilience. We do not look to ASEAN as the panacea for our individual problems. The unity and collective action of ASEAN provide a framework within which each member can determine its own future. The stability of relations among member countries of ASEAN provides an environment of confidence that is conducive to development.

The hard economic realities are that the way to get ahead is to be more efficient, more competitive and more productive and thus to enhance the competitiveness of our products on the world market.

By combining and directing efforts towards trying to shape as open and as liberal an international economic order as possible, ASEAN's collective economic diplomacy has influenced the political and economic policy decisions in the industrial centres of the North which affect our interests. We would not have been able to do this if we had acted alone.

The self-confidence that we have created through collective and pragmatic action has enabled us to resist external pressures, to take our future into our own hands and actively try to influence the environment around us. We have changed the structure of international politics in Southeast Asia. We have gained a measure of control over forces that will influence our future. This is the broader significance of the actions we have taken on the Cambodian issue, in our economic relations with the developed countries and the major powers, and on a host of other issues.

I have dwelt at some length on the experience of my country and our partners in ASEAN not in the spirit of arrogance or because I believe that our experience is unique. Indeed, I have used ASEAN as an example of what the Third World could do, precisely because I do not believe our experience is unique. We have done what some have done and what the majority of the international community can also do, if only they can summon up the will to do it.