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Opening Statement
by
H.E. Dr. Surakiart Sathirathai
Deputy Prime Minister of Thailand
At the
Seminar for South-to-South Cooperation for Decades of People with
Disabilities: An Orientation to APCD
Thursday, 28 July 2005
UNCC, Bangkok, Thailand

Your Excellency Mr. Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mohajeed,
Minister of Social Welfare of Bangladesh,
Mr. Shigeru Mochida, Deputy Executive Secretary of UNESCAP,
Mr. Mikiharu Sato, Resident Representative of JICA in Thailand,
Distinguished participants,
Ladies and Gentleman.

On behalf of the Royal Thai Government, it is a great pleasure for me to extend a warm welcome to all the distinguished delegates attending the Seminar for South-to-South Cooperation for Decades of People with Disabilities: An Orientation to the Asia-Pacific Development Center on Disability or APCD.

I wish to commend the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security of Thailand, the Japan International Cooperation Agency, the UNESCAP, and the network of disabled persons for organizing this seminar. This is the third APCD seminar that Thailand is proud to host on enhancing South-South cooperation for persons with disabilities. This seminar plays a vital role in fulfilling the goals of the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons which has been extended for another 10 years from 2003 – 2012.

For the first time, we are privileged to be joined by participants not only from the Asia-Pacific region but also representatives from countries in Africa, the Arab region as well as Latin America and the Caribbean region. Such a wide range of participation from developing regions marks an important contribution to the global effort in addressing the issue of disabled persons. This seminar serves to enhance cooperation amongst developing regions towards the empowerment of persons with disabilities and promote a barrier-free society for persons with disabilities beyond the Asia-Pacific region.

The issue of persons with disabilities is of global concern. The number of persons with disabilities exceeds 600 million persons of whom 80 percent live in developing regions. This issue is not only a humanitarian agenda but also a development issue linked to human rights, human security and poverty eradication. It is estimated that over 40 percent of persons with disabilities in developing countries of the Asia-Pacific are poor. This segment of society would need to be incorporated into national poverty reduction programmes to achieve the targets of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.

The international community has demonstrated its political will to address the concerns of the disabled. The United Nations World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons of 1982 has laid down effective strategies and support measures for prevention, rehabilitation and the equalization of opportunities. The United Nations is now in the process of drafting a Comprehensive and Integral International Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights and Dignity of Persons and Disabilities. Thailand is an active participant in the drafting process being amongst the Asian members of the Working Group to prepare the draft text.

In Thailand, the full integration of the disabled into society is a national agenda. The Thai Constitution has specific provisions for promoting the rights of persons with disabilities. The Legislation on Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons Act of 1991 serves to facilitate the integration of disabled persons into society and to enhance their potentials for self-development. It was promulgated as a result of cooperative effort of government, non-government, and organizations of the disabled. It includes measures on vocational training, skill development, as well as providing opportunities for education, employment and access to community facilities. We have also embarked on campaigns to awaken public consciousness of the rights of the disabled to ensure their inclusion in social and community life. The Thai Government has clearly changed its policy from a charity-based approach to a rights-based approach of service provision to persons with disabilities.

Thailand's policies for the disabled gained international recognition upon receiving the Franklin Delano Roosevelt International Disability Award in 2001. Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn graciously presented the FDR Award to the APCD. Earlier this week, we were honoured by the presence of Her Royal Highness for graciously presiding over the opening of the APCD's new office building.

Distinguished participants,

National efforts are effective when reinforced by regional initiatives and cooperation. Upon the initiative of the Thai Government, the Asia-Pacific Development Center on Disability or APCD was established in 2002 which complements the plan of action laid down in the Asia and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons (1993-2002). The Biwako Millennium Framework for Action also recognized the APCD as a coordinating agency for persons with disabilities amongst developing nations in the Asia-Pacific region. The APCD is an example of a joint collaboration of the Thai Government with multi-stake holders as JICA, the UN-ESCAP and non-governmental organizations to serve as a regional center on disability in developing countries in the Asia-Pacific.

The APCD has expanded its activities to include training, networking and collaboration to promote the full participation and equality of persons with disabilities in society. An important goal of the APCD activities is to enhance Asia-Pacific regional networking and collaboration. This includes forging cooperation with both government agencies, international organizations and non-governmental organizations.

This seminar is testimony to the value of South-South cooperation which primarily focuses on economic development. The APCD has made South-South cooperation relevant to the disabled. The APCD facilitates inter-regional cooperation between the Asia-Pacific region, the African region, the Arab region, and the Latin American and Caribbean countries toward the empowerment of people with disabilities and a barrier-free society within our respective regions.

I have confidence in the strength and potential of the APCD in expanding its regional activities. Through partnership with multi-stakeholders, the APCD can expand its cooperation with donor countries including networks of disabled persons of the developed nations. This concept of partnership is reflected in the United Nations Secretary-General's Report "in Larger Freedom" which underscores the role of civil societies in galvanizing global partnerships on specific issues of marginalized groups.

Distinguished participants,

Persons with disabilities are far from having achieved equal opportunities while their integration into society is far from satisfactory. Public awareness as well as public action campaigns must be our priority to ensure that persons with disabilities live their lives as integrated part of the society. I said public awareness and public action because awareness alone is not enough. There must

be action at the national, regional and international levels. In my travels to the provinces throughout the country, I have met with many disabled persons who proved to be the most able persons in their own right. They contribute to their own respective communities as much or if not more than other fellow members of the community. Physical disability must not inhibit one's potential to excel. Given the opportunities and the right facilities, we see them excel academically, socially, economically, and athletically. I want to see this as a norm not an exception in all communities. I know that governments, non-government organizations and civil society and the APCD are expanding their activities along these lines to enhance the rights of the disabled. But what I am asking is just one single word "more".

I just want to see more awareness, I just want to see more action, and I just want to see more outcome. I am not asking for anything new but merely for more. Everyone in whatever capacity should try at least a little more. That is why when I had the honour to be President of the Fifth Meeting of the State Parties to the Mine Ban Convention, I went to the World Bank to break a new ground.

Traditionally, the issue of landmines was perceived as a security issue. But its consequences on mine victims' handicap have resounding impacts on their immediate families and relatives, in their living and in their earnings. Anti-personnel mine is therefore not simply a security issue but also a social and economic development issue. I met Mr. James Wolfensohn, then President of the World Bank, to argue that the World Bank should no longer regard the anti-personnel mine as a security issue. Rather it is essentially and equally a development issue. I was glad that President Wolfensohn was convinced and agreed on the Bank's partnership to support mine action in the light of development.

Distinguished participants,

I can never overemphasize the important role of civil society and NGOs in addressing humanitarian and development issues and in collaborating with the government. The APCD is no exception. It has extended its cooperation with developed economies and other multi-stakeholders. Such partnership would strengthen its regional activities which in turn could complement multilateral approaches to addressing the core issues of disabled persons.

In conclusion, I would like to express my gratitude to the Office of Welfare Promotion, Protection, and Empowerment of Vulnerable Groups, Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, the Japan International Cooperation Agency and the UNESCAP for their support in organizing this seminar.

I wish this seminar all the success in fulfilling its objectives and look forward to receiving the report of its outcome. With this remark, I have the honour to declare open the Seminar for South-to-South Cooperation for Decades of People with Disabilities: An Orientation to APCD.

Thank you.