

Foreword by the Secretary-General

Peace and prosperity for our people. The reason for building the ASEAN Community could not be put more simply. Nor could it be more compelling. The Bali Concord II of 2003 and its three-pillar architecture of the ASEAN Community reflected the ASEAN Leaders' desire to focus attention on these three "Ps".

With the 10th ASEAN Summit in Vientiane, activities to boost regional cooperation in political/security matters, economic integration and social-cultural development – the ASEAN Community's core business – were clearly defined. It has been an unprecedented year of action. Of note, we expanded negotiations for free trade agreements with our Dialogue Partners, strengthened our collaboration with several countries to fight terrorism and moved to narrow the development gap within ASEAN. When the tsunami disaster hit on 26 December 2004, we pulled together to initiate an emergency summit in Jakarta to mobilise resources for relief and reconstruction. Going forward, we are now considering putting in place an ASEAN Charter.

Our Dialogue Partners see the importance of the ASEAN Community and several have committed resources to implement projects in our Vientiane Action Programme. It is recognised that a strong ASEAN is an effective partner in meeting the security and economic challenges of today. ASEAN is also perceived to have an important role in determining how the larger East Asian community is shaped. The relevance of ASEAN in regional affairs and international developments has never been greater.

Yet, while the rest of the world sees ASEAN as an important regional grouping, the people of ASEAN, in contrast, can be somewhat disengaged.

Each activity, workshop and agreement ASEAN implemented aimed to strengthen the ASEAN Community which would translate into a better life for our people. However, outside government circles, this objective unfortunately tends to be obscured, inadvertently blurred by the numerous ASEAN meetings and activities, ASEAN bureaucratise, and the unique "ASEAN Way" of handling issues. We cannot realistically talk about a strong ASEAN if our 550 million citizens do not feel a connection to the region and the community we are trying to build. The ASEAN Leaders have recognised this issue and in formulating the Bali Concord II, consciously sought to raise the value of ASEAN to our people.

With ASEAN, ten diverse countries in Southeast Asia have come together as a community to create a safer and better world for their citizens. Building the ASEAN Community is a huge task but we are focussed and have a concrete plan to go forward. I am optimistic that we will have a strong ASEAN Community by 2020. If not sooner.



Ong Keng Yong

