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Launch of the 2009 Human Development Report (HDR09)

Opening Remarks by

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Salutations

- Yang Berbahagia Tan Sri Nor Mohamed Bin Yakcop, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department
- Ms. Jeni Klugman, Director, UNDP's Human Development Report Office in New York
- Excellencies, Distinguished guests, Members of the media.

On behalf of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), it gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to the national launch of UNDP's annual flagship publication, the Human Development Report (HDR).

This year, the report's theme is "**Overcoming Barriers: Human mobility and development**". It was launched globally yesterday in Bangkok, by the Prime Minister of Thailand together with UNDP's Administrator, Ms. Helen Clark.

I would like to take this opportunity to express UNDP's sincere appreciation to Tan Sri Nor Mohamed Bin Yakcop for graciously agreeing to officiate this important report. We are honored to have Tan Sri here, as it clearly indicates the Malaysian government's interest and willingness to discuss the complex issue of migration, and its impact on development in Malaysia.

In addition, we are honored to have with us the Director of the Human Development Report Office from our Headquarters in New York, Ms Jeni Klugman.

She was in Bangkok yesterday with the UNDP Administrator, Helen Clark, for the global report launch, and we are glad to have her here today, as the Report's lead author and coordinator, to present its key messages and findings.

To bring greater understanding to this issue in the Malaysian context, as well as to enable the presentation of viewpoints, the UNDP has also invited an esteemed group of panelists: Mr. Alan Vernon, UNHCR's Representative in Malaysia; Ms. Florida Sandanasamy, Coordinator of the Migrant Working Group, as well as moderator Datuk Dr. Denison, SUHAKAM Commissioner and well-known commentator on social policy issues, who will also moderate the panel session later this morning. Thank you all for your valued participation today.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

The United Nations is built on the foundations of the UN Charter, as well as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Preamble to that document talks of the inalienable rights of the human family to "freedom, justice and peace".

In the context of accelerating globalization in the 21st century, we live in a highly mobile world, where more than *one in seven of the world's population is a migrant*.

For the nearly **1 billion people** who are on the move, migration presents not only the best, but oftentimes, the only option for those escaping war and persecution, or in search of economic betterment.

Without a doubt, mobility is a basic element of freedom. Not only does it bring improved opportunities for work, education, political rights, safety and health care, but it also opens up potentially large gains for source countries, as well as destination places.

Moreover, in the context of current patterns of globalization, which have favored the free flow of capital and global finance over labour (with many of the consequences evident in the current global financial and economic recession), one of the major conceptual reasons for allowing the free flow of people is that, it is the other side of the coin to the free flow of capital. Restrictions on the free flow of people are clearly part of the global imbalances we have to address, both regionally and globally.

This report is critical reading for anyone with an interest in migration and development issues, as it takes a decidedly fresh perspective on the issue that is not often heard in the current discourse on migration.

Instead of dwelling on the economic and social impacts in rich destination countries, ***Overcoming Barriers*** instead focuses *first* on developing countries and highlights the inequalities that dictate people's choices when they opt to move in order to improve their lives.

Hence, this report makes a strong and timely call for governments worldwide who are affected by the issue, to put into place policies that not only successfully integrate migrants, but also protect their basic rights, as they move to expand their choices, freedoms and quality of life.

Ladies and gentlemen.

It is interesting and relevant to note that **intra-Asian migration accounts for nearly 20 percent of all international migration.**

It is unsurprising then that Malaysia, with its rapid economic growth in the last few decades, is a primary migrant destination, chiefly due to the human development opportunities it offers poorer countries and people in the Asia Pacific region.

At the end of 2008, the Malaysian labour force was almost 12 million, which included about 2.1 million legal migrants from Bangladesh, Indonesia and other Asian countries. Additionally, it is estimated that nearly a quarter of all Malaysia's migrants are irregular.

Given that approximately 1 in 5 of Malaysia's working population is a migrant, it is no surprise that migration is central to the current Malaysian policy debate and discourse, as well as to any discussions on Malaysia's future economic model.

Ladies and gentlemen.

The Report presents the Malaysian development story as a good example of how economic migration can be a win-win proposition for both destination and source countries, citing the massive influx of Indonesian migrants in the 1970's and 80s, who filled the acute labour shortage in the Malaysian agricultural sector.

Likewise, in the last few decades, Malaysia has seen a significant increase of unskilled and semi-skilled Bangladeshi, Filipino, and Myanmar migrants, amongst others, who have become an important part of the Malaysian economy, providing low-skilled labour for various sectors, including domestic care, construction and services.

Apart from the support provided for Malaysia's development, the positive impacts these migrants have resonate far beyond Malaysia's borders. Their remittances back to the respective countries of origin have been invaluable in terms of raising the quality of life, as well as income, healthcare and education for their families, not to mention their positive impact in terms of reducing the incidence of child labour in their home countries.

Unfortunately, with the global economic downturn, remittances to developing countries are expected to fall from US\$308 billion in 2008 to US\$293 billion in 2009, no doubt with negative developmental impacts in countries that are significantly dependant on these revenues, such as Bangladesh and the Philippines.

As a result of the bleak protracted economic outlook, globally and regionally, Malaysia is likely to see more migrants, both authorised and unauthorised, making their way here with the aim of improving their livelihood.

No doubt this presents a challenge and dilemma for the Malaysian government, which has to balance the need for migrant labour, which is now an intrinsic part of its development and economic story, while ensuring the welfare and wellbeing of its own citizens.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

There is no easy solution to this complex issue. The influx of unskilled and semi-skilled migrants to Malaysia will no doubt continue, based on the country's own development needs, as well as the needs of those escaping economic, political and social strife in neighbouring countries.

While we cannot stem the tide, we can however manage the issue better by putting into place policies that ensure the rights and welfare of migrants. If issues of migrant access and treatment are not dealt with, no doubt there will be negative repercussions for human development, at national, regional and global levels.

Moving forward, UNDP strongly believes that in times of economic difficulty, a protectionist policy of restricting migrant labour or revoking permits may not be the best solution for the medium to long term.

Instead, as the 2009 Human Development Report advocates, a better approach may be found in policy reform that creates legal channels for people to migrate, temporarily or permanently, based on need and the destination country's long-term economic strategy.

This is especially relevant for Malaysia, given the Government's current economic restructuring plan, which aims to transition Malaysia into a high-income economy by 2020. This will not be possible without an enlightened migration policy that addresses the needs of both high and low-skilled migrant workers.

I am pleased to say that this year's Human Development Report presents an informative and instructive reference point on these complex and multi-faceted issues that are relevant for all key stakeholders. It also outlines a **core package of six policy proposals** that should serve as guidelines for policy makers faced with very difficult challenges.

Ladies and gentlemen

Malaysia is also in a unique position due to the refugees it attracts from the region, many if not most of whom are fleeing from instability in their own countries. The UNHCR in Malaysia has been working closely with the Malaysian government for over three decades to help safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees in Malaysia, an issue with a distinct set of challenges in itself, made more complex because Malaysia is yet to sign the UN Convention on Refugees, and therefore does not officially recognize refugees.

As of end May 2009, there were some 49,000 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR in Malaysia, with an estimated further 45,000 unregistered refugees and asylum-seekers. Since Malaysia does not differentiate between economic migrants and refugees, there are some inherent challenges in how these two groups are perceived and treated by authorities and the local population, due to their vastly different situations. This is because migrants opt to move, while refugees are forced to do so.

Ladies and gentlemen

It is important for us to acknowledge that one quarter of Malaysia's migrants are irregular. Motivated by survival, these individuals are forced to seek employment in the "informal" job market, where due to their lack of legal status and legal recourse to protection, they are vulnerable to the issues of human trafficking, as well as exploitation due to an absence of regulation in pay, healthcare, and education.

This indeed makes a strong case for **increasing regularization**, as this could be a first step in managing the uneven costs that can be associated with migration, for both destination countries and migrants, such as crime, human rights abuse, and poor health due to dismal living conditions.

With Malaysia now positioning itself for economic recovery, the timing could not be better to accelerate dialogue in a multi-stakeholder forum, to identify reforms and policies that ensure Malaysia's best interests, while safeguarding the rights and interests of migrants and refugees as well.

UNDP and the broader UN family in Malaysia, stand ready to provide support for such a multi-stakeholder forum.

Ladies and gentlemen.

Before I conclude, I would like to highlight a recent survey in the Report that looks at local attitudes towards migrants. Out of 46 countries worldwide, which participated in the survey, Malaysians were distinctly noted for being **least in favour** of welcoming migrant workers.

While there may be reasons behind this, it is nonetheless clear that immediate action is needed to reverse such attitudes, as there will be serious repercussions for both migrants and Malaysian society as a whole if the situation is left unchecked.

While some quarters fear that migrant labour is a threat to local employment, the Report clears up this misconception and shows that more often than not, this is only a perceived threat that tends to get exaggerated in times of economic uncertainty.

As such, we strongly urge more education on the role of migrants, as well as their rights, by the relevant government bodies, civil society groups, as well as the mass media.

Ladies and gentlemen.

As a major partner in development for governments worldwide, the UNDP is pleased that this year's Report provides valuable insights into and guidance on this complex issue.

We hope this will help countries manage their migrant populations more effectively and humanely, whilst simultaneously reaping the economic benefits and minimizing an anti-migrant backlash.

While concluding, I would like to commend the Malaysian government on the proactive steps it has taken to date, such as its recent commitment to combat human trafficking, as well as the measures in place for refugee welfare, such as access to low-cost healthcare. I would also like to acknowledge its ongoing cooperation with UNHCR.

Despite the complexity of the task at hand, we are confident that an effective and equitable approach to migration policy that addresses both the development needs of Malaysia, as well as the rights of its migrant population, can be achieved through a consultative, multi-stakeholder approach.

As already stated, the UN in Malaysia stands ready to partner with, both the Government of Malaysia and key stakeholders, in making this a reality in the near future. Thank you.

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