... Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of the Regional Working Group for an ASEAN Human Rights Mechanism, allow me to greet you and extend a very warm welcome to this, the Eighth Workshop on the ASEAN Regional Mechanism on Human Rights. I would also like to take this opportunity to express our deepest appreciation to the government of Thailand which, through its foreign ministry, has been most gracious and cooperative in organizing this joint undertaking.

We meet in interesting times. Since the last Workshop we mounted in Singapore last year (a watershed in itself if one bears in mind that it was the first forum on human rights hosted in and by that country), we have seen the formation of a high level panel to draft the terms of reference for the human rights body mandated by Article 14 of the ASEAN Charter. Now, we are informed that the drafting is completed and the establishment of the AHRB is just round the corner.

This past year, as the members of the HLP met religiously to negotiate the ToR, we too stepped up efforts to maximize the windows of opportunity both to determine what the people on the ground thought of the AHRB and to engage the HLP where and when possible. We organized consultations with experts and other stakeholders in countries where we had national working groups, were present at consultations and dialogues other groups and state agencies coordinated, and met with the HLP formally for consultations in
September 2008 and March 2009 where we made our written submissions and oral interventions on the matter.

At this juncture, it is really no secret that civil society, the Working Group included, and even some governments perhaps, would have preferred a much stronger, a much more balanced, human rights body than what the imminent one will most likely be. We would have preferred a ToR document more legal than political in nature.

However, having said that, the Working Group has, early on in its advocacy, decided to adopt a constructive, consultative and step-by-step process involving governments and civil society groups. Our workshops are indeed the best example of this as we organize it every year in partnership with the government of an ASEAN member-state, preferably the Chair. Our chosen approach has always been engagement and so we welcome this opportunity to again meet with all of you and talk, openly and frankly, about what we can expect and what we should strive for, given the situation at hand.

Ladies and Gentlemen, for the next two days, we hope to discuss, among other things, the AHRB as well as human rights in an ASEAN with legal personality.

- Does the coming into effect of the Charter last December spell a genuine sea change in ASEAN's character which we can take advantage of?
- Is the drafting of an ASEAN Declaration and/or Convention on Human Rights really a necessary step towards a human rights regime in the region?
- How must the AHRB be set up?
- How do we see the operationalization of the AHRB's promotion AND protection functions, given the current limitations of its powers?
• How should the process of selection be capitalized on?
• How can an enlightened composition be ensured precisely to temper the effects of its limited powers?
The credibility and integrity of the AHRB will largely depend on the credibility, integrity, independence and impartiality of its members. It is therefore of utmost importance that member states appoint men and women of such caliber to sit in the Body.
• How are the parallel processes on women and children, and migrant workers, faring and what developments can be expected?

These are but some of the questions we hope to make headway in this Workshop. Ultimately of course, the objective of this exercise is to create and enhance the conditions for a more effective regional system comprised of empowered mechanisms, and a more satisfactory pace of advance in getting there.

The Working Group “for an ASEAN Human Rights Mechanism” will not fade away at the establishment of the AHRB. Such establishment will be an important step in moving towards a credible human rights regime in ASEAN. It took dedicated and sustained advocacy on the part of civil society groups for us to get to this juncture. I know it will take more from us and other stakeholders to empower it. This is why this workshop is also an opportune time to explore the AHRB’s future engagement with stakeholders in the region. What can we do? How can we help?

The regional mechanism on human rights which we envisioned more than a decade ago, and for which we continue to advocate, is a system which is capable of effectively protecting and promoting human rights. Our revitalized campaign will no longer be for the straightforward establishment of a mechanism but for the progressive empowerment of
what will be established for us to work with. This is a commitment we renew today.

On this note, may I end by thanking the international agencies and funding institutions that have been, and that continue to be, supportive of the Working Group’s advocacy as well as those who contribute to the sustainment of our efforts. Special mention must be made of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF) and Canadian CIDA’s Southeast Asia Regional Cooperation in Human Development (SEARCH).

I wish you all a productive two days and I look forward to an open and frank dialogue.

Thank you for your kind attention.

Bangkok, 14 July 2009