

**ADDRESS AT THE STATE BANQUET OFFERED BY THE
KING OF MALAYSIA, THE YANG DI-PERTUAN AGONG XI,
SULTAN SALAHUDDIN ABDUL AZIS SHAH ALHAJ**

Kuala Lumpur, March 1st, 2001

It is a true privilege for me to be the first President of Colombia to conduct an official visit to Malaysia, and to be the fortunate guest of the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong XI of this great and dear nation, in whose green color and exuberance I recognize the natural wealth of a tropical environment that bonds us in brotherhood, even if we are geographically distant.

Your Majesty, Sultan Salahuddin Abdul:

In the magical vortex of the American continent, where the islands of the Caribbean Sea converge with the Isthmus of Panama and the great land of South America, you find 40 million human beings, 40 million hard-working, dynamic men and women who convey a message of friendship to the people of Malaysia through their Head of State.

Colombia, your Majesty, a country that, like Malaysia, possesses one of the world's largest and richest biodiversities and who is working for its social development, has closely

followed your country's development throughout its recent history.

We know and admire the far-reaching changes brought about with the enactment of the New Economic Policy 30 years ago. Such wise policy brought together economic growth goals and the redistribution of income. We know of the important progress you have made in the manufacturing of electronic components and integrated circuits, as well as the highly sophisticated sound and video equipment, without losing sight of your importance in the world production of basic commodities such as cocoa, palm oil and rubber. We have also learned from the intelligent manner in which you integrated the private sector into your economic development and the brilliant manner in which you overcame the financial crisis of the late 90s, and your ability to find your way back to the road to growth.

There is no doubt that the Malaysian example is a benchmark for countries such as Colombia who are intent on walking the road to development and social justice, and, who confront

overwhelming challenges along the way such as the world drug problem, violence, and poverty.

For almost four decades Colombia has endured the brunt of an internal conflict where brothers see their brothers bleed to death, promoted by a small minority that does not believe in democratic channels and whose members do not even represent one out of every thousand Colombians.

I have personally been at the forefront of the peace process with the oldest rebel group in our country. We are now at the negotiation stage. Such negotiation is taking place in an area of detente established with the sole purpose of holding the peace talks. We have also established contact with the second largest rebel group, with a very good outlook, and with the unanimous and generous support of the international community, that has given us its political support to turn this process into the engine that will help us attain our ultimate goal: peace. And there is no going back.

The road to peace is not easy, nor does it produce immediate results, but it is the only road, and we have decided to walk this road with patience and determination.

Unfortunately violence in Colombia has been compounded and financed by the evil interests of narcotics traffickers, who breed death and corruption throughout the world. This is a world problem and the international community cannot turn its back on Colombia. You and I know that we will only put an end to this problem if we confront it together, under the principle of shared responsibility.

My government has designed an integral strategy to strengthen my country's institutions and increase social investment in my country. The objectives sought include offering productive alternatives to those presently engaged in growing coca leaf or poppy seed as their means of subsistence. This strategy –which includes the peace process, improving the justice system, servicing the population displaced by violence, programs for disseminating and protecting human rights, and building social infrastructure– has received the enthusiastic support of several countries and

world agencies, both at an individual level as well as through the Peace Process Support Group established last year in Madrid.

With respect to Malaysia, there are many areas for possible cooperation, and there is no doubt in my mind that the most important field for cooperation is in the area of palm oil, where your country plays the very important role of being the main producer of palm oil in the world.

Colombia is the first producer of palm oil in the Americas and ranks fourth worldwide. So, we have many reasons to believe that this crop is an ideal means of subsistence for our peasants, and an ideal substitute for the illegal crops that have caused so much harm to our country and to the entire world.

That is why we are here in Malaysia, with the purpose of inviting your entrepreneurs to come to our country, to bring their experience and expertise and invest in a field they know so well. In Colombia we have over 3 million hectares of land eligible for palm oil production, as well as excellent human and

technical resources that can guarantee the success of any investment project or joint venture between us.

Important strides have been made in this regard. During the last four years we have been honored with the visits paid by the Minister of Primary Industries of Malaysia, by different trade and technical missions that have exchanged much information and shared experiences in this promising agro industry, and Colombian ministers and businessmen have in turn visited Malaysia.

I wish to avail myself of this opportunity to thank the Malaysian authorities for the generous cooperation given to my country by sending us their technicians. Thanks to their research we have identified the best lands for agricultural developments as well as identified the most common diseases affecting this crop.

I come on this high level visit accompanied by State officials, entrepreneurs, and leaders of trade associations engaged in palm oil production. I truly hope that we can define the vehicles for cooperation and business that will allow us to progress in this effort.

Your Majesty:

Our two nations share a seat in many international fora such as the United Nations Organization, the World Trade Organization, the Movement of Non Aligned Countries, the G-77 and, more recently, the G-15, where Colombia was admitted last year with Malaysia's blessing.

My country looks to the East and to all other countries that share with us the vast Pacific basin with growing interest. Travelers like ourselves, who come from Latin America are marveled when we have the chance to see the accelerated growth of East Asia. These peoples, who two or three decades ago were living an internal conflict, dealing with poverty and social unrest, have emerged, thanks to the clairvoyance of their leaders, their social discipline, and the joint efforts of the State and private enterprise, as modern and competitive societies, with high economic and social indicators. Your millenary wisdom guided you out of the crisis and you are once again at the forefront of economic development in the Pacific and in the modern world.

We welcome the activities undertaken by the Pacific Basin Economic Council - PBEC - and the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council – PECC – during the last seven years. We were admitted to these agencies as full-fledged members in 1994 in this same city. Both agencies have acted as vehicles for academic and business meetings with Malaysia and the entire East Asian Rim.

We have also participated as guests in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Working Groups on telecommunications and energy, and we will soon expand this wealth of experience by participating in the trade promotion group.

Colombia's participation in these agencies is clear proof of its serious and decided commitment to economic cooperation with the Pacific Basin. That is why I would like to insist on my country's interest in joining the APEC, an aspiration that benefits both our trade and investment possibilities with Malaysia. We hope you will support both our request and the

suspension of the moratorium on the entrance of new members.

On the other hand, Colombia, like Malaysia, is in favor of promoting the Latin America – East Asia Forum as the instance for dialogue and cooperation between the two regions, and where we act as adjunct coordinators for Latin America.

Lastly, now that my country holds a seat as a non permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, since last January 1st and through December 31st of the year 2002, allow me to reiterate to the people of Malaysia the great importance we attach to the process for expanding and reforming such Council, with the purpose of correcting the imbalances in its present composition, improving decision making mechanisms, and accord greater transparency to the conduct of its work, and in so doing ensure a more legitimate and representative spread of the organization's member countries.

At this forum, as in many others, we can join efforts to achieve the common goal of having a safe world in peace, where

diversity is a means for cultural enrichment and not grounds for controversy.

Your Majesty:

A Malaysian proverb rightly says, “We can repay a debt in gold, but we will always be in debt to those who have been kind to us”.

My people, the members of my delegation, my wife and I, will always be in debt with your Majesty and the people of Malaysia for the hospitality and kindness bestowed upon us.

Today you carry the symbol of Colombia, its freedom and courage, in the form of the Cross of Boyacá, created by the Libertador Simon Bolivar himself to honor all those who are considered, in all fairness, as friends of Colombia. I too will take home with me the highest decoration of Malaysia, an honor that heightens me and brings me closer to this land of progress and future.

Therefore, moved by the feelings of friendship and affection that have brought us together in this beautiful night in Kuala Lumpur, I ask you, my dear friends, to join me in a toast in honor of the health of the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong, the health of your Majesty Rajah Permaisuri Agong, and in honor of the excellent ties between our countries, and for the happiness and prosperity of the dear people of Malaysia.

Thank you very much.