MR. CHAIRPERSON
DISTINGUISHED DELEGATES
COLLEAGUES, FRIENDS
LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

On behalf on the Malaysian delegation, allow me to join other delegations in congratulating you to the chair. We would also like to thank the Ministry of Social Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia for your gracious hospitality in hosting this 3rd East Asia Ministerial Forum on Families in this beautiful island of Bali.

Mr. Chairperson,

Recalling the first East Asia Ministerial Forum on Families (EAMFF) in Hanoi in 2004 and subsequently in Singapore in 2006, my delegation is happy to note that we are seriously moving on with our mission i.e. “Strengthening Family Resilience: Moving From Policy to Action”. In
September 2007, our Senior Officials have deliberated at length on the draft Bali Statement which essentially seeks to strengthen collaboration for programmes on family resilience. While we agreed that this EAMFF is still in its infancy, I sincerely hope the outcome of this Forum will manifest in concrete mechanisms to implement our recommendations.

All of us gathered here recognise that the family institution performs multifaceted functions in the development and well-being of its members. In order to enable the family institution to fulfill its societal roles and responsibilities, it requires support from the state, civil society and from family members themselves. In this regard, it is essential that we examine social services policies from the family and not just from the individual perspective and whether they contribute towards the strengthening of family resilience. Effective support and protection to families and their individual members requires that services respond appropriately to the needs that exist at different stages of the family lifecycle and the individual lifespan.

In addressing the issue of family resilience, further understanding of what constitutes a strong family is required especially in identifying traits that enable families to cope in situations of adversity. Nevertheless not all families have the ability and tenacity to cope with crisis and hence, the issue of social protection should also be addressed. While it may not be possible for us to institutionalise a comprehensive social security system or a welfare state, given our limited resources, social protection or some form of social assistance system (or social safety net) is necessary in view of the current global economic downturn.
However, the experiences of many industrialised countries that have completed their demographic transition have demonstrated serious financial pressures on any social security systems. Therefore, some of the costs of any social protection or safety net should be borne by the family itself. Families should be empowered to build their resilience, for example, either through micro enterprise, life long learning or the provision of various social supports within the community. Realising that many affirmative actions may have been taken by the EAMFF participating countries, this meeting can be the platform for us to exchange experiences and to learn from each other on the road map for family strengthening.

In this regard, I would like to suggest that we fully optimise the afternoon session to discuss in depth the means of which we can share information on policies, programs and research, make training programs more accessible, develop indicators of family resilience and further explore a family perspective in social services policies and programmes.

Mr. Chairperson,

Allow me to present some of the trends in family formation and initiatives undertaken by the Malaysian Government on strengthening family resilience. Currently, the population of Malaysia is 27.23 million (2007) and is projected to increase to 28.24 million by 2010. As compared to a population growth rate of 2.5 percent per annum, the number of households (which can also be used as an indicator for families), has
been growing at a faster rate, (3.9 per cent per annum) which resulted in an increase in the number of households, i.e. from 3.5 million in 1991 to 4.8 million in 2000 and more than 6 million in 2007. The country has also experienced a reduction in the average overall household/family size, from 4.8 persons in 1991 to 4.6 in 2000. This shift towards smaller households is the result of out-migration and fertility decline, which subsequently affects the functioning of the family unit.

In recent years we have also seen a gradual shift in long-held attitudes towards marriage, child bearing and relationships. More Malaysians are remaining single where 18.8% of those aged 30 to 34 years old were still single during the 2000 population census. The mean age at first marriage has risen to 28.6 years for men and 25.1 years for females during the same year. A significant decline in fertility has also been evident, from a high of 6.0 children per woman in 1960 to 2.8 in 2004 (MPFS 2004), partly the consequence of increasing age at first marriage.

Although the family as an institution is generally stable, we are witnessing the young placing priorities on careers and life goals and at the same time adopting more liberal views towards sexual matters. Life-long commitment to marriage is increasingly challenged and increasing dual income families are putting a toll on family responsibilities. With ageing of the population, we are also witnessing increasing numbers of “sandwich generations” where working adults have to support both their elderly parents and young children.
Mr. Chairperson,

In view of the above trends, Malaysia’s concern is to develop a social system which can provide the support and protection for families to be strong and resilient. Recognising the family institution as the basic unit in society based on marriage between a man and a woman and the agent for the holistic development of the individual and family, Malaysia is amending the Islamic Family Law Act and Law Reform (Marriage and Divorce) Act to better protect and safeguard the family institution. Measures will also continue to be undertaken to improve enforcement and speedy implementation of court decisions on family matters. Other policies that are in place and being reviewed or formulated are available in the country report.

In view of the current global economic crisis, allow me to mention some of the actions undertaken by Malaysia to assist the more than 6 million families. Presently, Malaysia is in the second phase of the Ninth Development Plan (2006-2010), and some affirmative actions will be implemented in the forthcoming Budget 2009. One of the top agenda in both these important blue prints is to ensure that the quality of life of Malaysians is protected especially for vulnerable families. Towards this end, an additional RM 7 billion stimulus package has been set aside for the financial year 2009 which among others would increase disposable income and domestic consumption.
A recent study conducted by the NPFDB in July 2008 on the effects of inflation on the family, revealed that many families were willing to change their lifestyles to suit the current economic downturn. Many resorted to cutting back on non-essential household expenses such as vacations and utilizing public transportation. As a measure to address rising food and fuel prices, 38% of mothers were prepared to join the work force to boost the family income. Towards this end, the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, through the Department of Women Development, has initiated a “Home Managers” training programme for women. While some indications of increase in family conflict were evident in the above study, the ability of families to adjust their lifestyles and spending habits bore well for the average Malaysian family.

Although the Malaysian household income has improved over the years (RM 3,249 in 2004 to RM 3,686 in 2007), recently the Government has acknowledged the difficulties faced by families following the increase in price of essentials goods. To lighten the burden of every strata of society, the Social Safety Net scheme that was introduced in 1990 was widened to include various types of support ranging from child care, education, housing, health care and transportation. Particular attention was given to vulnerable families such as single mothers, families with disabled persons and the elderly. For example, the Government has raised the eligibility criteria for financial assistance under the Welfare Department (from a monthly household income of RM 400 to RM 720 for Peninsular Malaysia, RM 830 for Sarawak and RM 960 for Sabah). With this increase, the number of eligible recipients is expected to double from 54,000 to 110,000 households. Eligibility criteria for childcare subsidy will also be increased
beginning 2009 (from monthly household income of RM 2,400 to RM 3,000) to enable more civil servants and families balance their work and life responsibilities. Mindful of the need to encourage greater resilience among the disabled, starting July 2008, working disabled persons with a monthly income of RM 1,200 (previously RM 750) will be given a monthly allowance of RM 300 (RM 200 before 2008 Budget).

Recently, my Ministry launched the “Search Project” where community leaders are engaged to identify families in need who are missed by the current social net. In addition, we believe that smart partnership between the Government and the corporate sector is vital for the success of any safety net. A number of big corporations are already committing their corporate social responsibilities (CSR) in the community but we plan for more synergetic, comprehensive and effective strategies so that we will be able to meet the needs of various strata of society.

Mr. Chairperson,

While the Malaysian Government acknowledges the need to provide social support especially to vulnerable or high risks families and that this should be provided not only by the state but also the private sector, NGOs and the community, promotional, developmental and preventive measures to empower families to be more resilient are equally important. The thrust of the Government until the end of the current Development Plan (2006-2010) is to strengthen the family institutions to effectively nurture and instill moral and ethical values in the young to cope with rapid socio-economic development and changing lifestyles. Strong family units will be
necessary to provide care and support for the sick, disabled and the elderly.

While child safety remains a priority, emphasis will be given to early childhood development for children up to 4 years. Youth programmes have been revised and value added to equip them with the requisite skills and engaged as partners in development. Beginning January 2009, a landmark Living Skills Programme for approximately 100,000 school leavers will be introduced into the National Service, which among others will include topics on family relationships, gender and living without violence. Meanwhile, the SMARTSTART Pre Marital Courses for the young continue to be implemented by NGOs in partnership with the Government.

The changing roles and responsibilities of women in the family and society will see more women trained in micro-enterprises. Affordable child care services will be expanded and flexible working arrangement promoted, including working from home. The Parenting@Work programme implemented in 2007 aimed at helping working parents balance their work-life responsibilities has since been introduced to both the public and private sectors.

Mr. Chairperson,

One of the purpose of this forum is to enable us to deliberate on issues and challenges that affect family resilience in the region. As such, I would
like to take this opportunity to draw your attention to the issue which is very close to my heart – the issue of male participation in developing and strengthening family resilience. Equal participation of men and women in all areas of family and household responsibilities, including family planning and child-rearing should be promoted and encouraged by Governments, NGOs and the family members themselves. This should be pursued by means of advocacy towards changing the male mindset with regards to family relationships and responsibility. Employment legislation and fostering family friendly work environment such as providing family leave for men are needed in view of increasing participation of women in the labour force.

Mr. Chairperson,

The impact of globalization on the family is also underscored. Its impact can be seen on changing family structure, dynamics and responsibilities. For example, with greater internal and international migration which more often than not involve the men, more families are witnessing the absent father figure which has affected family functioning. The progress in ICT has also generated new challenges especially with regards to family values and social norms. Negative values and life styles prevalent through the internet require the strengthening of “social filters” within the family.
Mr. Chairperson,

Before I conclude, permit me to say that Malaysia will continue to actively support initiatives to uphold, rebuild and strengthen the family institution. It is my hope that with our keen participation and active sharing of experiences, we will be able to identify the efforts needed in maintaining the centrality of the family in social development.

THANK YOU.