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**OPENING REMARKS BY DR HAN TIERU
WHO REPRESENTATIVE FOR MALAYSIA, SINGAPORE AND BRUNEI
THE REGIONAL TRAINING COURSE ON RISK COMMUNICATION IN
HEALTH EMERGENCIES, 27 APRIL – 1 MAY 2009**

HONOURABLE DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF HEALTH, MALAYSIA, TAN SRI DATUK
SERI DR. ISMAIL MERICAN,
DR. SANDRA TEMPONGKO, DEPUTY DIRECTOR SEAMEO/TROPED
NETWORK
DR. ARTURO PESIGAN, REGIONAL ADVISER, EMERGENCY AND
HUMANITARIAN ACTION, WHO-WPRO
COUNTRY PARTICIPANTS,
FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES,

Good morning.

On behalf of WHO, I would like to welcome all of you to participate the Regional training course on risk communication in public health emergency. This training is particularly relevant and importance in the current outbreak of swine influenza A (H1N1) reported in Mexico and United states which have pandemic potential.

Over the next few days, we will be learning how appropriate and timely risk communication can be one of the key elements in responding to health emergencies. We will learn about communication strategies we can use to address public concerns, to encourage appropriate action and build trust in public health and government authorities.

Risk communications during health emergencies pose unique challenges. Recent experiences in emergencies in the world underscore the need for risk communication in all phases of the emergencies. The support from an informed public is vital to interventions. Health emergencies are often unpredictable and are accompanied by surprises and setbacks. These emergencies are usually alarming for the public and can result in extreme behaviour. Needless to say, health emergencies have a high political profile, especially when accompanied by social disruption and economic

losses, making them very newsworthy. The challenge is to be able to utilize risk communications effectively in a dual role of expediting control measures and mitigating social and economic consequences.

During the previous SARS outbreak, risk communication was just beginning to be viewed as a critical component of managing disease outbreaks. The lessons learnt from SARS stressed the importance of risk communication. When effective communication is done in the early stages, there is a greater chance of bringing the situation under control quickly. Lessons also show that if we tell people about a disease outbreak as soon as it begins, we are more likely to earn the trust of citizens and international community.

On the other hand, there were also times when communications was done poorly, or when government authorities waited too long before announcing a problem. Often when authorities were hesitant to share information and communicate with public timely and openly due to concerns about negative impact on trade or tourism, but the outcome was precisely the opposite of what they intended. The situations grew out of control, economic losses were far greater than would have incurred had the problem been confronted early. The most important lessons we learnt from previous outbreaks are that the risk communication should be timely and transparent.

So how do we do better in our risk communications?

The first vital step is to make a commitment to strengthening risk communication capacities; in terms of proper planning, effective training and investing in an effective system of risk communications. I applaud all the country participants here today who have taken this big step in being here today. Your interest and commitment to strengthen existing risk communication systems is crucial in developing strategies and plans, delivering appropriate messages to target audiences, monitoring and evaluating

effects of messages, networking with related agencies, and serving as advocates for risk reduction.

For your information, WHO organized a global consultation on outbreak communication in 2004 in Singapore and produced the WHO guidelines in outbreak communication. In November 2007, WHO Regional Office for Western Pacific and Ministry of Health Brunei jointly held a Regional workshop in risk communication with participation of MOH high level decision makers and risk communication officers to follow up implementation of the WHO guidelines on outbreak communication in this Region. The workshop reviewed the situation and gaps in risk communication and made various recommendations in strengthening this very important work.

Just 2 weeks ago Ministry of Health Malaysia and WHO jointly conducted a Rapid Containment Exercise, known as PANSTOP 3. The scope of the functional exercise was to implement measures related to rapid containment on potential influenza pandemic, which included decision-making, interagency coordination and risk communication. The importance of risk communications was well understood with suggestions of daily press release, educate public preventive measure using TV and radio, health education materials and distributing leaflet about antivirals.

I take this opportunity to congratulate SEAMEO TROPED Network in collaboration with WHO-WPRO for jointly organizing the training course and their undivided efforts in preparing and testing the regional training curriculum and modules for this risk communication training course. The goals of strengthening risk communication competencies will enable health emergency management teams in member states to be firmly equipped with a deeper understanding of strategies while enhancing capacity at regional, country and community level.

Last but not the least; I extend my deep appreciation to Ministry of Health Malaysia for their support and commitment as host country for this regional training course in risk communications. I would also like to convey my sincere thanks and

gratitude to the Honourable Director-General of Health; Tan Sri Datuk Seri Dr. Ismail Merican for his personal efforts, strong commitments and cooperation in strengthening risk communication and Health Emergency Management. Tan Sri Dr Ismail Merican was MOH spokesman during SARS outbreak, he has demonstrated his excellent skills and rich experiences in risk communication during SARS crisis which has been highly valued and could be further shared with us.

Finally allow me to assure you that WHO is committed to be your partner in these efforts. We look forward to learning and sharing together over the next few days and to working with you in the coming years as we work to enhance risk communications in the Western Pacific Region.

Thank you and good luck