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United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

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**The Importance of augmenting Alternative  
Development efforts – a focus on SE Asia**

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Sawadee Khrub – and Good Morning everyone,

Your Excellency, Ms. Nongnuth Phetcharatana, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Permanent Mission of the Royal Kingdom of Thailand to the United Nations in Vienna.

Your Excellency, Mr. Garciarevilla, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Permanent Mission of the Republic of Peru to the United Nations in Vienna.

Your Excellency, Mr. Sukhum Opasniputh, Deputy Secretary-General of ONCB.  
Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is an honour for me to give this closing address at the International Seminar Workshop on Sustainable Alternative Development. I am impressed to note that there are over 100 participants from over 27 countries. In order to place the important work which you have been doing over the past week in context, I would like to use this time to make what I would consider a number of global home truths – and then go on to point to some of the challenges which need to be addressed here in SE Asia.

But first, I would like to take a moment to express – on behalf of us all – our greatest sympathy for the victims of the immense flooding which is taking place many miles to the south of us here today. Along with many of those who live and work in Bangkok, I can attest to the immense strength of resolve and community spirit which will endure to make Thailand bounce back from this tragedy. During my almost 25 years with the United Nations serving on many continents, I have rarely seen such communal self-help and resourcefulness in responding to a slow-onset catastrophe which has left many homeless and without jobs – and many who have also sadly lost their lives. So, through this modest opportunity I would like the Ambassador and our Thai colleagues and friends in the room know that we are with you in solidarity and we will do what we can to assist you at this time of great national crisis.

I would now like to return to the main focus of my address.

As you will have been following in the news, in recent months there have been strident calls for changes to the international drug control system. Those who make these calls range across the entire spectrum – from those who would reform the system – to those who would overturn it entirely. But there is a history to how we got here. The current international drug control system has been developed by the countries of the world working together. It has been codified through the adoption of three conventions. These drug conventions enjoy near-universal adherence. What is more – the validity of the system has been frequently reiterated by governments collectively – certainly in the Special Session of the General Assembly in 1998 and more recently during a high-level summit of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs in 2009. We ought not to underplay this element of near universal adherence. We must remember that a multilateral system can only be made – or reformed – or changed – through the collective will of governments.

Having said this, I would go further. I would argue that “containment” has worked. Having served as a drug control officer for the better part of the past two decades, I believe this personally. Opiate cultivation over this period has declined globally. The same applies for coca cultivation. Production of botanically-based illicit hard drugs is limited to a few countries across the planet. According to UNODC estimates, drug use has effectively stabilized across globe. However, there are warning signs – mainly related to our region, in fact. I will come this later. So, the international drug control system is not perfect. But it has nonetheless contained the drug problem to “only” about 5% of world’s the adult population<sup>1</sup>. “Problematic” illicit drug users are significantly fewer than 1% of the adult population of the world.<sup>2</sup> Alternative development is one of the significant elements of this system.

But I would certainly agree that the international drug control system can be improved, and made more effective. And I fully support the call – made by many, some of whom sit among us today – for the greater use of evidence to establish what works. To improve the effectiveness of our conventions we need more debate, more evidence. And we need to use the evidence to inform policy. Finally, we need leaders who are brave enough to act on the consequences of what the evidence is telling us.

Ladies and gentlemen, these are some of what I would call **global home truths** which I believe need to be shared with a distinguished audience such as yourselves. But what about the situation close to home – here in SE Asia?

For the past four years (2007-2010) we have seen increases in **poppy cultivation** in Myanmar, which is far and away the largest poppy cultivator in the region, and we are worried about the prospects for a further expansion in 2011. In a month from now, I will launch the 2011 Opium Poppy Survey for SE Asia – and the news will not be good. More than this, by almost every single yardstick, **amphetamine-type stimulants** (or ATS) have supplanted opiates in terms of drug production, trafficking and consumption in East and SE Asia. The figures are alarming. Within the next two weeks, we will release our latest regional ATS trends analysis for SE Asia. And here again the news will not be good.

My overall conclusion is that the international community has **taken its eye off the ball** on drug production and trafficking in South-East Asia. The numbers are heading in the wrong direction for a region where the goal has been set up as a “Drug-Free ASEAN by 2015. It is perhaps time for a new initiative which establishes more realistic goals focused on the objective of “containment” and reduction.

And in this context, we must be proactive on all fronts to prevent our region again becoming a major drugs hub.

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<sup>1</sup> The segment aged between 15 and 64 years.

<sup>2</sup> Figures from WDR 2011: Number of illicit drug users, who use at least once a year, i.e. annual prevalence, from 149 to 272 million, which is 3.3% to 6.1% of the adult population; number of problem drug users, 15 to 39 million, which is 0.3% to 0.9% of the adult population.

Much work remains to be done in reducing supply of opium poppy which continues to wreak its devastation in terms of lives cut short through addiction.

Over the past week, you will have had an opportunity to see the shining example which Thailand has set for us. We can draw from Thailand's effort many of the key lessons of what works.

First, **community participation**. You have seen the many achievements of the Doi Tung project. The Secretary-General of the Mae Fa Luang Foundation, Khun Chai, explained how – by communicating constantly and mobilizing community participation continuously – the Doi Tung Project has been able to improve the lives of many communities and also to provide promise of a better future.

Next, **duration** of assistance. You have observed the selfless dedication of His Serene Highness Prince Bhisadej Rajani who admits that even after more than 40 years of sustained efforts – I repeat for emphasis 40 years – and many successes, the Royal Project still needs to continue to work hard to find ways to increase the wealth of poor hill tribe villagers and ensure they never have to turn back to opium for a living. This revelation humbles us.

Next, **sufficiency** of assistance. By some estimates, the Royal Government of Thailand has invested close to a billion dollars equivalent during this period of its own money.

Next, **sequencing** of assistance – the need to provide incentives and the “alternative” in alternative development before enforcing the law of the land.

Finally, **high-level political support**. And in Thailand, this comes right from the top. We respect the compassion and farsighted vision of His Majesty the King of Thailand and how he has been able to motivate the efforts of many to assist with the development and provision of better sustainable alternatives to hill tribe people enabling them to give up opium poppy.

Besides being privileged to see how Thailand is addressing the issues of illicit crop cultivation in northern Thailand, the added outcome of this workshop has been the development of inputs to the draft “International Guiding Principles on Alternative Development”. These should provide a reference point and should be considered as international standards for development-oriented drug policies. It should also guide the formulation of policies that will best benefit the small farmers, improving their lives in a way that would sustainably negate their need to produce illicit drug crops. We hope that the Guiding Principles will be adopted at a high-level International Conference on Alternative Development which is planned to follow this workshop. I am pleased that the report of this workshop will be presented at the 55th Session of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs for consideration in March 2012.

Before concluding, I would like to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to the Royal Thai Government, the Office of the Narcotics Control Board, the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs, Mae Fah Luang Foundation, the Royal Project, the Highland Research and Development Institute, the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau for hosting this important and memorable event in collaboration with the Government of Peru and UNODC. Last but not least my thanks and appreciation goes to the many people on the “substance team” who have worked so hard behind the scenes to ensure this workshop has been a success.

Many lessons have been learned after more than four decades of alternative development efforts. The International Seminar Workshop on Sustainable Alternative Development has been able to bring together

I would like to thank the many experts and practitioners who travelled so far to join us here this week. Please know that you form a solid network of knowledge and skills which is unique on the planet. I would like to thank our donors – many of whom are with us today – for having stayed the course over the past years and even decades. Your contribution – especially in Latin America, in SW Asia and here in SE Asia – is sincerely valued and appreciated.

I conclude by expressing a call. Let us use this unique opportunity we have been given to unite in purpose to find realistic and practical solutions to ensure that sustainable alternative development contributes to the following goals. That our citizens can be free from hunger; that they can have access to land on which they can sustain themselves; that their human rights are protected; and that they can live their lives in dignity.

As I have shown with the worrying drug trends in SE Asia, the time to act is now.

Thank you. And a safe trip home.