

**SPEECH BY SPS MALIKI OSMAN AT THE 6<sup>TH</sup> ASIAN CONFERENCE ON FOOD & NUTRITION SAFETY, CO-ORGANIZED BY THE INTERNATIONAL LIFE SCIENCES INSTITUTE AND THE AGRI-FOOD & VETERINARY AUTHORITY, 26 NOVEMBER 2012**

Good morning. It gives me great pleasure to join you today at the 6<sup>th</sup> Asian Conference on Food and Nutrition Safety.

**Challenges to Food Safety**

2 In recent years, food safety has become increasingly significant and visible. Globalization and international trade has brought challenges to food safety, and raised the need for us to be more alert than ever to food safety contamination incidents occurring around the world.

3 This morning, I would like to highlight three key challenges on food safety faced by all of us, whether we are small or big countries, developing or developed countries.

4 First, changes in food production methods have made it more complex and difficult to ensure food safety. For example, the excessive use of antibiotics could lead to the emergence of resistant bacteria in farm animals, which may be a source of infection for humans. Intensive farming practices also facilitate the rapid spread of potential animal diseases and zoonotic diseases, as in the case of avian influenza.

5 Second, with global warming and climate change, those environmental conditions which are conducive to fungal growth may increase the risk of mycotoxins being present in food crops. Countries therefore need to respond to the changing environment and adapt food safety management programmes appropriately to maintain effective control.

6 Third, advances in science and technology and methods of food processing, albeit for the better, can create new food safety issues. For example, in the use of

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bio-engineering and nanotechnology in the food industry, we have to ensure that persistent non-biodegradable nano-particles do not contaminate the food and pose health risks.

7 Let me add that even as the scientists and practitioners tackle these challenges, we should also focus our attention on the consumers. With easy access to information via the Internet and other social media platforms, our consumers are now more aware of health issues and possible health risks from food. I believe that greater consumer awareness is a good thing. But, we should be cautious of sensational or inaccurate reports which could undermine consumer confidence in food safety. We must maintain the trust between consumers, regulators and the food industry, and not erode it.

**Integrated Approach to Food Safety**

8 Moving forward, I urge all of you to build up transparent food safety systems which are science-based as a key response to these challenges. Let me briefly share with you Singapore's experience.

9 In Singapore, food safety is a top priority as we import more than 90% of our food. Over time, we have built up a stringent and transparent food safety system based on four basic principles:

- First, setting stringent food safety requirements and monitoring for threats;
- Second, establishing strong networks with other relevant authorities;
- Third, verifying and enforcing compliance of our safety standards; and

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- Fourth, raising awareness of safe food handling practices.

10 To ensure the integrity and credibility of the inspection system, the Agri-food and Veterinary Authority (AVA), which is Singapore's food safety authority, maintains high standards in government certification, compliance and enforcement capabilities.

11 But simply setting high standards is not enough. We need greater cooperation and collaboration amongst the stakeholders across the entire food supply chain to ensure food safety.

12 In Singapore, our food industry stakeholders include food producers, manufacturers, importers, distributors and even central catering kitchens. The AVA works closely with these stakeholders to communicate safety standards for compliance, and promote industry best practices and innovation. In addition, the AVA conducts regular training courses for workers in the industry to equip and upgrade their capabilities in areas such as food processing, preparation, storage and food safety management systems. Manpower development in the food sector is crucial to ensure that the highest food safety standards are maintained.

14 Besides industry players, academics and other regulatory agencies also play important roles that contribute towards food safety. The AVA engages these stakeholders through various platforms such as public-private partnerships, professional and scientific meetings, and advisory committees. We should tap on the wealth of knowledge and experience of others in the food supply chain to generate innovative ideas and solutions to food safety.

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**More Sharing and Collaboration**

15 There is also potential for countries to share information and cooperate in ensuring food safety. As food production and supply methods continue to evolve and as our physical environment changes, threats to food safety have correspondingly become more complex and can affect different geographies.

16 All of us have to remain vigilant against new and emerging food safety threats. To this end, horizon scanning and futures research can help in identifying, analysing and managing emerging risks.

17 The International Food Safety Authorities Network and the European Community's Rapid Alert System for food products are good examples of how countries can cooperate and share information on food safety alerts and food recalls. This will allow us to learn from past experiences and develop better controls.

18 As more and varied threats arise, the conventional approach of food safety testing based on the analysis of known biological and chemical targets is becoming inadequate. Contaminants not usually on the radar screen of regulatory bodies may be missed. In response, the AVA has developed a non-targeted analytical approach, based primarily on the latest laboratory testing equipment for identifying rare or unanticipated compounds in foodstuff that may be hazardous to health. This would enable us to take a more proactive stance in food testing, instead of focusing solely on known contaminants.

19 While food safety scientists today have sophisticated and efficient tools to detect and measure potential food safety risks, it is important for the scientific community to continue to research and strive for technology breakthroughs. Improved speed and accuracy in detecting contamination and diseases are crucial,

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especially during outbreak investigations. More sharing and collaboration across national boundaries will go a long way to attain food safety for all of us.

20 Let me conclude by saying that ensuring food and nutrition safety is a highly complex task, but it is by no means an impossible task. We can fulfil this task by putting in place food safety systems that are science based, and having regulatory systems which have the flexibility to adapt to new and emerging food safety challenges.

21 I wish you all a fruitful conference ahead. Thank you.