

WELCOME ADDRESS

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you all today to this meeting of the IUCN/SSC Asian Rhino Specialist Group. I am particularly happy to note that the Chairman of this Group, Mr. Mohd. Khan bin Momin Khan has considered it appropriate to hold the meeting here in Indonesia at a time when much progress has been made in the field of both *in situ* as well as *ex situ* conservation of the rhinos.

The Indonesian archipelago — perhaps the largest in the world with over 13,000 islands — possesses an extremely rich and diverse flora and fauna that include such endangered species as the Javan and Sumatran rhinos. The plight of the Javan rhino has been attracting world wide attention since the early sixties when it was thought that only about 20 animals were surviving in Ujung Kulon National Park, situated at the western tip of Java. It is found nowhere else, and none survive even in zoos. Of the three extant species of rhino in Asia, it is the Javan rhino that faces the bleakest prospects for long-term survival because of its small population size that makes it very vulnerable to sudden perturbations in its environment. In an effort to save the rhino from an early, untimely extinction, the Directorate General of Forest Protection and Nature Conservation (PHPA) of the Ministry of Forestry, in association with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) launched a conservation programme in 1967, as a result of which the number of rhino in Ujung Kulon National Park has more than doubled in the intervening years.

At the beginning of 1982 however, five animals (representing almost 10% of the total population at that time) were found dead in the Park, thereby emphasising their vulnerability to sudden catastrophes. The cause of their death still remains uncertain. Today, the Javan rhino has the distinction of being the rarest large mammal on earth!

In comparison to the Javan rhino, the Sumatran rhino seems to have fared reasonably well and currently, its population in Sumatra is estimated to be anything between 450 and 700. Nevertheless, threats to its continued

survival in the wild still remain. Poaching is rampant and habitat loss continues unabated. Once numerous throughout Sumatra, the animal has declined in number throughout its range. The conversion of primary forest to agricultural holdings is a particularly serious cause of conservation problems in Sumatra, and the rhino has been amongst the species most affected by it. Already a combination of high rate of human population growth and inappropriate land-use policies has squeezed the rhino out of many areas in Sumatra, and should such disruptive processes continue unchecked, the Sumatran rhino, like the Javan rhino will find both its range and numbers shrinking at a rapid rate.

But the situation in Indonesia, as far as the two species of rhino are concerned, although grim, is not entirely hopeless. Given the will and commitment at both national as well as international levels, I am convinced that concerted action can be taken to halt the current trend. This meeting has been specially organised to review the current status of the rhinos, identify the threats (present as well as potential) to these animals throughout their range, and outline the strategies needed to ensure their long-term survival. The primary objective however must be the maintenance of as many individuals as possible in as wide a range of habitats as is feasible.

The captive breeding programme was proposed merely to deal with the rhinos whose habitat is either doomed or whose numbers are no longer large enough to maintain long-term viability. A good rhino habitat today is doomed if the area is already earmarked for other land-use. The agreement between the Republic of Indonesia and the United Kingdom (and later perhaps with USA as well) would allow for the capture of such doomed animals with a view to breeding them in captivity in zoos both here and abroad. We have already achieved substantial success in the capture of Sumatran rhino from one such doomed area in Sumatra, namely the Torgamba production forest. But we must always bear in mind that such captive breeding programmes are designed not to replace but reinforce the *in situ* conservation efforts of ours.

The rhino must have some place to live and something to eat. Both requirements are likely to be in even shorter supply in the years to come, in the light of the current demographic and development trends in Indonesia. The rhino should be regarded as a common property resource. It is a part of our natural heritage and its survival would depend not only on our determination and commitment, but also on the level of international assistance that may be forthcoming in the future. I conclude wishing you all, every success in your deliberations.