

**Opening Speech by
H.E. Mr. Abhisit Vejjajiva
Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Thailand
at
“International Conference on Language, Education,
and the Millennium Development Goals”
9 Nov 2010 at 8:15 am, Twin Towers Hotel, Bangkok**

**Vice-President of Mahidol University,
Director of UNESCO Bangkok,
Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

1. Thank you for inviting me to participate in this important event. It is inspiring to see so many delegates from around the world come together to discuss critical issues regarding language development and education, and their importance in helping us achieve our Millennium Development Goals.
2. Two months ago, I attended the 65th session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, which was held in conjunction with the U.N. Summit on the Millennium Development Goals. It was heartening at the time to see the world’s leaders come together to support our shared goals, and more importantly, to note the measurable progress they have already made toward achieving many of our objectives.
3. However, despite the positive progress reported by many countries – Thailand included – there are still millions of people we have yet to reach. These include our poorest and most vulnerable populations, and those living in the remotest areas of the world. We have an obligation to ensure that the fruits of our development efforts are both widespread and equitable, so that everyone can benefit from them, regardless of wealth, background or geography.

4. A matter of particular concern in this respect is that progress among the world's ethno-linguistic minorities continues to lag behind some of the successes we've seen in majority populations. This puts our minorities at greater risk of hunger, poverty, illiteracy and disease, and increases the likelihood of future tension and conflict.

5. It is their minority languages, among other factors, that have put them at disadvantage. UN agencies thus believe that we must embrace minority languages whenever possible in order to meet our MDGs, particularly with respect to universal primary education, gender equality, maternal health, child mortality, HIV/AIDS awareness, and the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger. We cannot be content with satisfactory MDG progress on the national level. Rather, leaders must make the extra effort to ensure that all social groups within a country are able to realize the benefits of development. Ethnic languages are not only a powerful tool but also step towards accomplishing our goals. By understanding – and respecting – differences in languages, we can better bridge communication and cultural gaps, and more effectively meet our MDGs through the promotion of mutual understanding, trust and positive relationships.

6. I believe that Thailand is something of a model in this regard. Our nation is home to 70 unique ethno-linguistic groups – a wealth of diversity that I personally consider to be one of our national treasures.

7. Recognizing the different linguistic and cultural backgrounds among our people, the Thai government has worked hard to protect and promote these cultural diversities. Nowhere is this more evident than in school, where curriculum now includes the study of local languages.

8. Let me emphasize here that education has always been one of my government's top priorities. The measures we have taken to widen educational opportunities range from offering financial assistance to families with school children to ensuring that all Thai students have access to 15 years of free basic education. However, no educational framework can be truly successful unless it accommodates and

encourages all children, regardless of backgrounds. A case in point is our work with ethno-linguistic minority communities. In particular, I recently approved the Royal Institute of Thailand's National Language Policy, which maintains the right of ethnic children to have their mother tongue included in the school curriculum. We firmly believe that the inclusion of local languages in schools helps students improve their academic performance and strengthen their aptitude in the Thai language, while preserving the individual languages and cultures that make us unique. I am also in the process of appointing a cabinet-level, strategic implementation committee to ensure the new Language Policy is put into practice in areas such as education, health care, regional commerce and human security.

9. In addition, the Thai Ministry of Education has been cooperating with various local and international organizations on programmes that encourage Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education, particularly in our country's border areas to the north, west and south. Just last month, my Foreign Minister, Kasit Piromya, led a delegation of foreign ambassadors to southern Thailand to visit one such programme, which SEAMEO has called a model for Southeast Asia. There, students in pilot schools learn to read and write in their native tongue, Pattani Malay, and then use that as a bridge to the national language of Thai. The children are doing very well – in fact, they are seldom absent, they participate enthusiastically, their self-confidence is growing, and their Thai language abilities are already 35% higher than similar students in monolingual Thai control schools. In addition to improved language abilities, we've also seen increased performance in science, mathematics, and other subjects. However, this project would not have been nearly as successful without the cooperation of parents, teachers, community leaders, religious authorities, and even musicians and artists, working alongside linguists from Mahidol University – not to mention the technical assistance from SIL International, financial support from UNICEF and the Thailand Research Fund, and moral support from UNESCO and SEAMEO. We hope to expand this approach to other schools throughout Thailand, in order to raise academic performance, foster economic growth and

social reconciliation, and continue to work toward the fulfillment of our MDGs.

10. It is in this spirit of continued progress and cooperation, Ladies and Gentlemen, that it is now my privilege to declare the “International Conference on Language, Education, and the Millennium Development Goals” officially opened. It is my sincere hope and expectation that what you accomplish here over the next three days will have a sustained impact on the lives of ethno-linguistic minority populations throughout the world, and ultimately, serve to contribute to a brighter future for us all.

11. Thank you and Sawasdee krub.
