KEYNOTE SPEECH

YANG BERHORMAT DATO’ SRI SHAHRIZAT ABDUL JALIL
MINISTER OF WOMEN, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
LAUNCH OF THE STATE OF THE WORLD’S CHILDREN REPORT 2011
8 SEPTEMBER 2011, THE ANNEXE, CENTRAL MARKET

Bismillahirahmanirrahim. Assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh and a very good afternoon.

[SALUTATIONS]

Mr Hans Olsen
UNICEF Representative to Malaysia

Members of the Diplomatic Community

Distinguished Guests

Members of the media

Ladies and Gentlemen.

[INTRODUCTION]

1. It is my pleasure to join all of you here at the launch of the State of the World’s Children Report 2011, with the theme “Adolescence: An Age of Opportunity”. I find this year’s theme very fitting, considering that we are entering the second International Year of Youth.

2. When I received the invitation from UNICEF to launch the report, I thought “this is an event I must attend” because engaging with youths has always given me new life and inspiration. In my years of service, I’ve realised that if you surround yourself with oldies, you run the risk of becoming old too – beyond your years! And I for one want to be young (at
heart) for as long as I can! For keeping me youthful, I must of course thank UNICEF and our youths here today.

Ladies and gentlemen,

[CONTENT]

3. Often seen as ‘too old to be treated like a child’ and yet ‘too young to be treated like an adult’, adolescent years can be a confusing state to navigate. Merciless in nature, it is a time of intense growth, when girls become young women and boys become young men. Sometimes, it is also a period of conflict between parents and child as adolescents test the boundaries on their journey towards independence. During these forays into independence, some adolescents may partake in risky behaviour, which exposes them to vulnerable situations.

6. While adolescence can almost seem like an ongoing battle, what with raging hormones and clashing personalities, adolescence, as both the UNICEF report and Mr. Olsen point out, is also an age of opportunity.

5. At this time, learning and development skills are at their peak. Here in Malaysia, we are lucky to have a government that has since 1957 prioritised the education of our young. And it is during their adolescence that youths are able to put this education to good use. More than anything, education gives them options – to apply the skills that not only improve their own lives but also strengthen our own society.

**Malaysia’s Investments in its Children – Laws, Policies & Programmes**

Ladies and gentlemen,

6. Malaysia has made substantial investments, not only in education, as mentioned earlier. We have also invested in areas such as health and protection to cultivate the creativity and talents of our 5 ½ million adolescents, our building blocks of the future.

7. Our commitment to our children’s welfare and the protection and promotion of their rights is demonstrated, *inter alia*, in our ratification of the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). It gives me such great pleasure to announce another
milestone in child protection and child rights promotion: just yesterday, Cabinet approved the Ministry’s recommendation to accede to the CRC’s two Optional Protocols. These are the:


b. **Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict**

8. These are strengthened further by other international instruments, such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and local legislation like the Child Act 2001. Our laws are complemented by the introduction of solid policies and their corresponding action plans. These include the National Policy for Child and the National Child Protection Policy.

9. In fact, we’re embarking on a series of revisions to strengthen existing legislation and policy. For example, we are focusing on strengthening our juvenile justice system through what is called ‘restorative justice’. Instead of jail time, child in conflict with the law do ‘community time’ where they follow a ‘rights-based diversion programme’. This is how we hope to reduce their numbers in detention centres, but more importantly, give them the chance to turn their life around with the support of their community. This shift will be reflected in amendments to the Child Act that will be tabled early next year.

10. The Department of Social Welfare, on its part, is working to strengthen the skills of child and adolescent providers. Together with UNICEF and a number of NGOs, we have succeeded in introducing Social Work Competency Standards. These standards will give service providers the tools and professional recognition they need in order to deliver quality interventions in child protection. They will form the basis of a Social Workers Act due to be tabled in Parliament in 2012.

11. The Act will propose to regulate the profession of social work in Malaysia and strengthen the provision of welfare services towards the care, safety and protection of all children and adolescents in Malaysia.

12. Through our smart partnership with the NGO Childline Malaysia, we have introduced a children’s hotline: Childline 15999. Available 24-hour a day, children and adolescents can call and report child maltreatment cases. Meanwhile, the Talian Nur 15999 hotline allows
anyone to report suspected child abuse and other social ills that the community believes a family, child or adolescent is facing.

13. Other services the Ministry makes available for all children in Malaysia include Kafe@Teen, which provides counselling services, educational programmes as well as health services to adolescents. There are currently 5 centres offering such facilities nationwide.

Ladies and gentlemen,

14. I truly believe that our youth must be empowered by giving them the information they need in order to make informed decisions. This is why my Ministry has tirelessly pursued the introduction of a social and reproductive health education module in different settings, such as secondary schools and national service training camps. A range of modules are aimed at moulding adolescents into healthy, resilient and responsible individuals with positive moral values.

15. Unfortunately, there continue to remain pockets of vulnerable adolescents who require our additional support and attention to escape poverty, health risks, violence and exploitation. In our efforts to reach out to them, the Ministry collaborates with the Kuala Lumpur Krash Pad, a youth centre that is located in Chow Kit – an area that has a reported presence of vulnerable adolescents and youth. The centre plays a role to provide a safe space for these children to empower them to make healthy and socially responsible decisions. The centre is developing services that include peer support counselling, play therapy, referral services and provision of alternative education to build life skills for adolescents.

[CONCLUSION]

Ladies and Gentlemen:

16. The government strongly believes in creating opportunities for adolescents. To do so, we must involve adolescents in the decision-making process. We must provide them with platforms of expression that help them understand their role as active citizens and not just as passive recipients. For they are the future. They are what matters.

17. Before I end my speech, I would like to thank UNICEF once again, for highlighting such an important segment of our community that often gets dismissed and sometimes even criminalised. With so much potential, it is up to us to reduce the challenges for adolescents in Malaysia and not only reach for the stars but get there. I look forward to discussing the
issues affecting adolescents in Malaysia and how we can collaborate to realise our collective vision for a better Malaysia.

18. On that note, thank you once again for having me here, and to all our youths, thank you for being here. May Allah bless our efforts as we mobilize to move our nations towards a bright future.

Sekian, wassalamualaikum w.b.t