

Speech delivered by Dr. Myint Htwe, Union Minister for Health and Sports, at the opening ceremony of “27th Prepared Foodstuff Product Working Group Meeting and its Related Events” and “13th ASEAN Food Testing Laboratory Committee Meeting”

Mercure Mandalay Hill, Mandalay

23th November 2018

Mingalabar! Good Morning,

Honorable Chief Minister, Deputy Speaker of the Parliament, Chairman of Health and Sports Committee of Pyithu Hluttaw, Chairman of the Health, Sports and Culture Committee of Amyotha Hluttaw, Ministers of Mandalay Region Government Regional Members of Parliament, Distinguished delegates of ASEAN member countries, Scientists and Technical Professionals from ASEAN member countries, Permanent Secretary of Ministry of Health and Sports, Director-General, Deputy Directors-General and senior officials of Department of Food and Drug, Ministry of Health and Sports, Regional Health Director of Mandalay Region, Invited Guests who are here in this meeting hall today.

1. It is my distinct privilege and honor to deliver the opening remarks to inaugurate this meeting.
2. On behalf of Ministry of Health and Sports (MoHS), I would like to convey my warm wishes to all of you who are here to attend the **“27th meeting of Prepared Foodstuff Product Working Group (PFPWG) and its related meetings”** as well as the **“13th ASEAN Food Testing Laboratory Meeting”** and ASEAN Secretariat.
3. We are proud to host these meetings especially in the second largest and historic city Mandalay, which is also a very clean city.

4. I would especially thank the ASEAN secretariat for supporting us to be able to conduct this meeting in Myanmar.
5. As a matter of fact, the domain of food and drug is given priority importance in Myanmar and between the food and drug, food is especially important as we are taking food every day starting from wake up early in the morning until we rest for the day.
6. The incidence and prevalence of NCD in our country is on an increasing trend. It is mainly due to the fact that people are not aware of the amount of fat, sugar, salt and some chemical ingredients and other contents of prepared foodstuff products.
7. The prepared foodstuff products are generally of good taste and the contents are written in English language. Of course, the products are nicely packed and with attractive colored boxes.
8. All these factors had led to high consumption of these food stuff products resulting in NCD. We could not afford to let it happen. Otherwise, we have to shell out a major chunk of our health budget to treat NCD and its associated complications.
9. That is one of the main reasons why MoHS is giving special attention to the domain of food.
10. The ultimate outcome of a series of meetings which you are conducting will help our country as well as ASEAN member countries in improving the overall scenario of food domain and hence the overall health status of the population.
11. We are also promoting the health literacy level of the whole population by way of providing tablets to all BHS staff all over the country which include all health promoting information, importance of consuming

wholesome and safe food, dangers of taking unregulated prepared foodstuff products, Standard Operating Procedures and Guidelines in public health which are produced by MoHS.

12. We hope that within a few years, our population will be health literate in many perspectives and taking good quality and safe foodstuff products regulated by ASEAN standard.
13. In other words, people will not take inferior and unsafely prepared foodstuff products which are not in line with the standard set by you.
14. On the contrary, consumption of unregulated prepared foodstuff products can negatively affect the man on the street to the highest officials in each and every country in the ASEAN region.
15. Therefore, the output of the working group meeting will definitely help us in one way or the other in improving the quality and safety of food in general and prepared foodstuff products in particular in our region.
16. In our country, monitoring the quality of prepared foodstuff products is crucial as foodstuff products are prepared by several producers, from small scale to large scale industries, in every nook and corner of the country. Here, we should not forget the important role of prepared foodstuff producers.
17. It is appreciated that ASEAN is giving attention on the prepared foodstuff products by conducting a series of **“Prepared Foodstuff Product Working Group (PFPWG) meetings”** and its related meetings as well as **“ASEAN Food Testing Laboratory Meeting”**.
18. All meetings are geared towards producing quality and safely prepared foodstuff products for consumption.
19. The domain of prepared foodstuff products is too wide that we need to

tackle the challenges and issues from different perspectives applying different strategic approaches and also taking into consideration the level of development of foodstuff industries in ASEAN countries.

20. The standard that you are going to set in the ASEAN member countries will have wider positive implications to all of us who are sitting here as well as to the population at large.
21. We know that the standard set in most developed countries on prepared foodstuff products are very high and stringent.
22. My notion is that we may not be able to follow or reach to that level at this point in time as we do not have sufficient human resource capital, technical capacity and capability of already available human resource capital, let alone the availability of state-of-the-art machines and laboratory equipment.
23. However, in view of its importance to improving population health, Myanmar will try its level best to reach a certain standard that will be set by ASEAN as a whole.
24. To make this objective into fruition, strong, unreserved and continuous proactive collaboration in terms of exchanging technical matters as well as sharing of experience among ASEAN countries is *sine qua non*.
25. I am confident that this working group meeting will not only pave a way to reach our ultimate objectives but also strengthen our networks and networking among the professionals and scientists. This is one of the effective ways to strengthen our collaboration in a sustainable manner.
26. This collaboration once achieved will be very effective and conducive to long term sustainability in improving the overall food safety scenario especially if we implement it under a set framework and guidelines agreed

upon by all of us.

27. I am confident that as ASEAN member countries are well united and firmly connected; it will not pose a big challenge to all of us.
28. If we have a will, there will always be a way to do it. So let us make it happen!
29. When we are considering the Standard Operating Procedures and Guidelines on prepared foodstuff products, certain issues are crucial for its smooth implementation.
30. Factors such as economic perspective of food industries, importance accorded to safety and quality issues on food, developmental status of the country in terms of availability of well- trained human resource capital, presence of state-of-the-art supplies and equipment for testing of prepared foodstuff products, level of support that can be provided by FDA, the policy and strategy of FDA or similar entities and last but not the least health literacy level of the population at large must all be taken into account.
31. These so-called factors or predictors or determinants will influence whether we will be successful or not in our future endeavors or processes in food quality and food product safety issues.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

32. Another issue that is bothering our country is unlimited and uncontrolled influx of prepared foodstuff products coming into our country through illegal routes. This is the biggest challenge facing us. We are trying to get help from the Customs Department. But, it is easier said than done. We need more stringent measures to be in place.

33. My sincere sense or my gut feeling is that it will be a long way and that we will be encountering that problem for some time. Be that as it may, we will strive hard to overcome this challenge.
34. I would urge the delegates from ASEAN member countries to share their experience regarding control of illegal imports of prepared foodstuff products into their respective countries.
35. If that topic is under the general rubric of the objectives of the meeting, do let us know. We would like to learn from all of you as well. You may wish to discuss even outside the mandate of the meeting agenda.
36. I was informed that **“26th ASEAN prepared foodstuff product meeting”** and **“12th ASEAN Food Testing Laboratory Meeting”** were held in Lankawe Malaysia.
37. Many realistic and useful outputs or outcomes were emanated out of these two meetings. I would like to urge my staff to review all these documents seriously and if there is any clarification to be made, you can put forward to this meeting. I am sure that this meeting will help further progress based on previous outputs or outcomes of the Lankawe meeting.
38. As you might be aware that ASEAN principles and guidelines for national food control system were endorsed at the 19th Prepared Foodstuff Working Group meeting held in September 2014 in Yangon. That was some sort of a milestone for all of us to further move ahead in this food domain.
39. I have quickly gone through the list of meeting documents and noticed that the documents are highly technical in nature and of high quality. For that matter, I would like to congratulate the members of the working group and ASEAN secretariat.

40. Two of the topics which are of particular importance to my country are:
(a) Harmonization of nutrition labelling and (b) Harmonization of prepared foodstuff standards.
41. We have started to tackle nutrition labelling in food products to depict it in Myanmar language as majority of the population residing in remote, underserved and rural areas could not read English language. Nutrition contents labelling in Myanmar language will result in long term positive impact on population health.
42. I would like to reiterate that the domain of food stuff is so wide that we need to tackle it in a step-wise and phase-wise manner and also taking into consideration the epidemiological scenario of foodstuff industries and consumers in our member countries.
43. I also noticed that the working group meeting will be held back to back with two important Task Force meetings, i.e., **“19th Task Force on Harmonizing Prepared Foodstuff Standard meeting”** and **“1st Joint Sectoral Committee Meeting on Mutual Recognition Arrangement for Prepared Foodstuff”**.
44. The working group meeting and Task Force meetings would be reinforcing each other tremendously.
45. The development of harmonized food control requirements for ASEAN would provide a basis for member countries to establish compatible domestic regulations that will enable respective regulatory agencies to have mutual confidence in food control system and also for fair trade practices.
46. I would urge to quickly establish ASEAN Food Testing Laboratories network not only to exchange and share experience but also to enhance technical

competency of the laboratories. It is mutually beneficial.

47. I also welcome the likely establishment of ASEAN Food Testing Reference Laboratories for various sub-domains of foodstuff.
48. It is desirable to have a common framework for harmonious implementation of food safety in our region. This will not preclude to moving closer to the ASEAN economic community. Food safety will improve our member countries competitiveness in international trade.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

49. In conclusion, I could strongly say that if we abide by the ASEAN standard on prepared food staff products, health benefits will be immense and overall population health will reach to greater heights in the months and years to come.
50. The conduct of several technical meetings and implementation of its outputs and outcomes will help increase ASEAN competitiveness within and outside the region.
51. I look forward to have strong, dynamic and robust networks in the domain of prepared foodstuff products and its ramifications.
52. I wish you to have a fruitful and productive meeting. Thank you.

(The speech is prepared by the Union Minister himself)