

**Welcome Remarks<sup>1</sup>**  
by Dr. Ruben L. Villareal<sup>2</sup>

A most pleasant morning to all of you.

It is our distinct pleasure to have you with us on this significant day, particularly for our Biotechnology Information Center (BIS) as it unveils to the whole world its website.

I would like to thank you all for squeezing in this activity in our busy schedules, particularly our speakers this morning - Secretary Alabastro, Dr. Zakri, and Dr. Falvey.

Dr. Zakri and Dr. Falvey are speakers at the ongoing Asian Agriculture Congress in Manila, wherein SEARCA is also one of the co-sponsors. We grabbed the opportunity of their presence in Manila in order that we may have them as resource persons for this symposium. We are very grateful that they agreed to complicate their schedule for this event.

Since this is a historic moment in the life of BIC, let me go back to a several years back and sketch for you how the BIC came into being. But before I do that, I would like to say that SEARCA's involvement in biotechnology began in 1973 when it implemented Fermented Foods of Southeast Asia Project. Led by Dr. Michio Kozaki, a visiting professor from Tokyo University of Agriculture, and Dr. Priscilla C. Sanchez of the UPLB Department of Food Science and Technology, the project studied food fermentation and preservation processes in the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Japan.

Later in the mid-1980s, SEARCA also conducted a Biotechnology in Agriculture Project.

As SEARCA ended its Sixth Five-Year Plan and began developing its Seventh Five-Year Plan in 1999, the call of the times made it inevitable that biotechnology would be one of its research priority themes.

In the Seventh Five-Year Plan, SEARCA clearly states its aim to "build up information based on research and assessment studies on the possible effects of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and other newly introduced technologies on the environment, the economy, health, and the agriculture sector of developing countries in the region based on biosafety guidelines." The purpose for such is to help solidify the stand and policies that governments in Southeast Asia may adopt on biotechnology issues.

As a start-up activity to give life to this plan, SEARCA co-sponsored on 11 March 2000 a *Biotechnology Forum*, featuring Dr. Norman Borlaug, the acknowledge "Father of

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<sup>1</sup> Opening Remarks delivered at the Symposium on Food Security and Environmental Protection on 26 April 2001 at the SEARCA Auditorium, Los Baños, Laguna, Philippines.

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the Green Revolution" and 1970 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate.

The forum was conducted in Manila in collaboration with the Philippines' National Academy of Science and Technology (NAST) and International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA).

Then in June 2000, the Center convened a Southeast Asian conference-workshop on biotechnology, in collaboration with the UN Food and Agriculture Organization and the Asia and Pacific Seed Association (APSA).

One of the significant results of that meeting was the agreement on the need to establish a public information center on biotechnology. As a response to this well-recognized need, SEARCA and ISAAA signed an agreement on 27 July 2000 to initiate the establishment of a Biotechnology Information Center, whose website we are launching this morning.

The BIC is envisioned to cater to the needs of the general public for factual, credible, and balanced information on biotechnology in Southeast Asia. We want it to be a one-stop place where the public can know about the pros and cons of biotechnology. We would like it to be a venue of civil and research-based debate on matters concerning biotechnology.

While the BIC would be using various kinds of media, it would largely be using the Internet for bigger and faster access by the public.

Setting up this information center is a big job. For one, the subject matter is hot and quite complex, not to mention emotion-laden. We have therefore been knocking on the doors of potential partners - both public and private -- to obtain information and material support for this project.

For instance, in the Philippines, we have approached the Department of Agriculture as well as the Department of Science and Technology - both of which expressed interest and support for this initiative. We are still working on turning such interest and support into something "spendable."

Related to biotechnology, SEARCA is also conducting other activities on Food Safety. For example, this coming 10-11 May, we will have a Regional Consultative Workshop on Food Safety Research and Development in Bangkok, Thailand. Its general objective is to present, discuss, and identify food safety issues, conditions, trends, and research and development entry points that are strategically relevant both to SEARCA and the Southeast Asian region.

Earlier, SEARCA co-sponsored with the Indonesian Society of Agricultural Biotechnologists (ISAB) a Food Safety and Environmental Risk Assessment Workshop in Bogor, Indonesia on 10-11 April.

Why are we doing these and other related activities?

Ladies and gentlemen, in all these, our goal is the development of the member-countries of SEAMEO. We subscribe to a development perspective that is more than the prevailing economic paradigm. Often we measure development using economic factors - gross national product, gross domestic product, per capita income, etc. These are helpful and fine. But I believe that the development is more than these. Development should be synonymous with having a better quality of life, and this is what we at SEARCA are working for.

Having a better quality of life means more than having sufficient food on the table and excess cash for some luxuries in life. It is having the kind of life that, as the late Senator Robert Kennedy so beautifully said, can be measured "by the health of our youth, the quality of their education or the joy of their play ... the beauty of our poetry, the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials..."

And may I add, by the heartiness of our laughter, the contentment of our hearts, our care and concern for one another and for our mother earth. After all, these are the aspects of our lives that really make living worthwhile.

This, ultimately, is what we desire SEARCA to contribute to the peoples and nations of Southeast Asia and the world at large.

It is our hope that the information we generate from this symposium and the information that we are able to disseminate through the BIC will move us closer to our ultimate goal of having a quality of life for all.

Thank you and *Mabuhay!!!*