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Asian Institute of Technology

AIT's 127th Graduation

Speech by Prominent Alumnus – N. Rajapakse

Good Afternoon, Chief Guest; Chairman and members of the Board of Trustees; President Worsak Kanok-Nukulchai; Distinguished Invitees; the class of May 2017; faculty, students and staff; parents; ladies and gentlemen.

It is a great honor for me to deliver remarks as a prominent alumnus at this graduation ceremony and congratulate and convey my best wishes to those who received degrees today. I thank President Worsak Kanok-nukulchai and his executive team for giving me this prestigious opportunity. Ladies and gentlemen, let me take a moment to express my highest respect and deepest gratitude to His Majesty the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej for his unreserved and gracious support to AIT and for granting me the honour to receive a King's Scholarship to study for the doctoral degree. Without the blessing of his majesty AIT would not become a reality and we would not be here to enjoy this happy occasion.

It is with great pleasure I remember my time at AIT. It was in May 1981, I received my master's degree from AIT at this auditorium. Two years later, I received my doctoral degree here. My time at AIT was intellectually and culturally rewarding and AIT shaped me to accept challenges and become successful. I was fortunate to learn from the best teachers and researchers during my days at AIT. We had intellectual giants who influenced us both inside and outside the classroom. They taught us more than science and engineering and shaped our characters and values. Like you, I also learned at AIT how to interact with different nationalities, value their cultures and engage in respectful debate. The friendships I made at AIT have lasted nearly four decades and my academic network in Asia won't be a reality without my AIT roots. I left AIT in 1983 to pursue postdoctoral studies in Canada and eventually settled there. However, my roots in Asia are strong. I am privileged to see my former students in leadership positions at Asian universities.

AIT today is different from the place I left in 1983. It has changed and transformed over the past 3 decades to meet the needs of the region. As we know, the government and donor priorities and objectives have changed, the regional politics have changed, the societies of the region have changed and students and their expectations have changed. As a result the mission and business model of AIT and other institutions in the region have changed. Change is a positive thing and ability to change and innovate in a competitive environment is a recipe for success. I am pleased that AIT under the able leadership of the current Board Chair and members, Prof. Worsak Kanok-nukulchai and his executive team have met these challenges very successfully.



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Many of the changes we see in Asia and around the world are driven by the waves of globalization or internationalization that started to sweep the world around the end of the twentieth century. Our schools, students, industry and businesses, culture, research, way of life have become globalized or internationalized. Education and research are no longer localized and they have crossed continents. Information and communication technologies especially the internet have greatly facilitated this change. The word global citizen is found in the strategic plans of almost every university in the world. Whether it really means anything or just the flavour of the day is open to debate.

When the term globalization/global citizenship started to appear prominently in the North American and European academic communities and institutions, a few thoughts came to my mind. The first and foremost was that AIT did it more than 50 years ago. The very foundation of AIT was to create a global citizen perhaps initially more focused on Asia. AIT Campus from day one has been a global campus where different nationalities and cultures engaged each other in equitable terms and respectful manner. Our classrooms and campus life epitomized and nurtured global citizenship. It is delightful to see that AIT ranked number 1 in the U-multirank based on internationalization metrics. No other institution in the world can claim the depth and breadth AIT has achieved with respect to internationalization of its core activities and campus community.

As you leave AIT with your degrees, the world you enter has many challenges and inequities. Amongst the foremost of these challenges are access to clean water, energy, healthcare and food. The demand for these resources and services is rapidly increasing across Asia. Energy, water, healthcare, sanitation and food are foundation pillars of high living standards and economic prosperity. Nearly one billion people in Asia today have no access to electricity. Globally close to 1.8 billion people drink water that is contaminated and more than half of that population is in Asia. Over 800 million people are undernourished according to WHO due to lack of access to food and a significant portion is again in Asia. These challenges have a much bigger impact on women and children. Increasing consumption of energy is a major factor of greenhouse gas emission and climate change. Climate change is a reality that we have to accept and tackle. Serious droughts and floods have caused significant damages across Asia and food security has become a major concern. Energy, water, health, sanitation and food are not stand alone silos and solutions to these challenges require interdisciplinary and out of the box thinking.

Since its inception AIT has been playing a critical role in regional education and research related to water and infrastructure engineering, and starting from the 1970s initiated pioneering programs in energy and agriculture and food engineering education and research. Those who received degrees today have been trained to become experts in engineering and technology in fields such as water resources, infrastructure, transportation, computer science, ICT, GIS and others that are vital to the prosperity of Asia. It is important for us to recognize that solutions to most pressing problems are found at the intersection of many disciplines. Think about specialists in robotics and sensors working



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on crop monitoring using drones and fusion of sensors, wireless technology, and bioinformatics for medical diagnosis in remote villages. The knowledge and research experience gained at AIT will allow you to innovate technologies to address critical challenges in water, health and sanitation, food, energy and other issues facing Asia and the globe. I encourage all of you to use the international network you developed at AIT to serve Asia and the world and build successful careers. Maintain active relationships with your colleagues from your school but remember that AIT is more than one school. Your colleagues in the Schools of Environment and Resource Development and Management can be effective partners in your career growth and successes especially when sustainability and entrepreneurship are the key drivers of a prosperous Asia. Whenever you have a chance, create opportunities and mentor fellow alumni. I have had the pleasure of mentoring AIT graduates who come to North America to pursue Ph.D. Please continue to interact with AIT and share your successes with your alma mater.

My concluding message to you is to lead the world in everything you do following the footsteps of your alma mater. The history of AIT and your experience at AIT have shown and given you tools to lead the world. Your success is AIT's success and each and every one of you can make AIT stands tall and proud and reach the next level of excellence. Congratulations again to you and your families for your academic achievements. I wish all members of the class of May 2017 very rewarding careers and continued success with their future endeavours.

Thank you very much.