RETHINKING ETHNICITY AND NATION BUILDING: MALAYSIA, SRI LANKA AND FIJI IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE.

1. The International conference-cum-workshop on the theme “Rethinking Ethnicity and Nation Building: Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Fiji In Comparative Perspective”, was jointly organised by the Malaysian Social Science Association (PSSM), the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, the Department of Sociology, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, and the Centre for Contemporary Pacific, Australian National University. It was held in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (Malaysian National University) on 26-28 February 2003. The conference was jointly sponsored by UNESCO, Bangkok Regional Office, and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, Bangkok.

2. The objective of the conference and workshop was to assemble renowned scholars, researchers and others from the three countries to discuss some of the latest scholarship, assess the state of the art, and chart a future programme of understanding and analysis on issues in ethnicity and nation building. The revised papers will be published in a book which can be used as reference by researchers, students and policy makers on the issue of ethnicity and nation-building in the region. Among the topics covered were:

- The legacy of colonialism and its impacts upon politics of ethnicity and nation building,
• Public policies (economic, education, language, culture, law) which have helped or hindered multiethnic harmony,
• Citizen’s rights in multiethnic societies, and
• Reimaginings of the nation in the contemporary era.

3. The conference began with the opening speeches by the Chairman of the Organising Committee, Professor Dato’ Dr. Abdul Rahman Embong, who is also President of the Malaysian Social Science Association, followed by the representatives from UNESCO, Mr Naren Prasad, and the Friedrich-Naumann Foundation representative, Mr Rainer Heufers. This was followed with the keynote address by Professor D. Horowitz who is James B. Duke Professor of Political Science and Law, Duke University, USA who spoke on “Rethinking Ethnicity, Rights and Nation-building in Ethnically Divided Societies”. The afternoon session was a public forum on the theme “Current Political Developments and Their Impact Upon Ethnicity and nation-building in Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Fiji” with Ms Zainah Anuar (Malaysia), Professor Siri Hettige (Sri Lanka) and Professor Brij Hal (Fiji) discussing current developments in the three countries that have direct impacts upon issues of ethnicity and nation building.

4. The first session on the second day saw Professor Cheah Boon Kheng (Malaysia), Dr. Michael Roberts (Sri Lanka) and Professor Brij Hal (Fiji) enlightening participants by providing the historical context for the entire workshop. This was done through their papers dealing on the theme “Setting the Historical Context: Envisioning the Nation at the Time of Independence”. Their papers focused on various key issues such as the envisioning of the nation by various forces at the point of independence,
the contestation and bargaining that took place, the nature of the nation that eventually evolved later and the reasons why it happened the way it did.

5. The second session dealt with the theme “Crafting the nation, Building the State: Ethnicity and Public Policies”. Dr. Sulochana Nair (Malaysia), Dr. C. Yuvaraj Thangarajah and Professor Siri Hettige (both representing Sri Lanka) and Ms Alumita Durutalo (Fiji) provided substantive materials and analyses of public policies that have shaped the nation and built the state in the three countries. The papers focused more on post-independence developments and questioned the success or otherwise of crafting the nation in the three countries through public policies they have adopted in fields of economy, politics, education, etc.

6. Session 3 addressed the theme of “Public Reimagaginings of the Nation”, an exercise to look into the possible future scenario. Professor Shamsul A.B (Malaysia), Professor Tudor Silva (Sri Lanka) and Tevita Baleiwaqa (Fiji) presented both mainstream ideas on the nation as well as contestations to the mainstream. The presenters examined whether the reimaginings will in any way impact upon public policies, the reworking of social contracts and the nature of the evolving nation state.

7. The closing session was an analytical round-up to discuss the agenda ahead. With Professor Abdul Rahman Embong (PSSM, Malaysia) chairing the session, the panellists were Professor Horotwitz (Duke University), Assoc. Prof. Diana Wong (IKMAS, UKM), Associate Professor Noraini Othman (IKMAS, UKM), Professor Siri Hettige (Sri Lanka), Professor Brij
Lal (Fiji) and Naren Prasad (UNESCO). The panellists discussed future research agenda, and explored the possibility of collaborative research in a continuous debate on the theme of ethnicity and nation-building. Through this way, the scholars can contribute more substantively to the rethinking of ethnicity and nation building not only in the three countries but also in the region as well.

8. In all, more than 150 participants attended the conference and workshop. Among the participants were Her Excellency the Fijian Ambassador to Malaysia, as well as the Secretary General of the Malaysian Ministry of National Unity and Social Development. The discussions throughout the three days were lively, candid and illuminating. As issues of ethnicity and nation-building are key issues in post-colonial societies, participants were particularly pleased with the discussions and expressed the hope that more of such activities will be held further in future. They expressed their sincere thanks to the sponsors, particularly to UNESCO, for supporting such activities which will contribute to the discourse and shape public opinion on nation-building.