Mr President, Vice-Presidents, Honourable Ministers, Director-General, Ladies and Gentlemen

1. The global health community convenes at a particularly challenging time. Across the world, approximately 300,000 people have lost their lives due to COVID-19, and many more have lost livelihoods and income as a direct result of this pandemic. On behalf of the government of Brunei Darussalam, I wish to extend our deepest sympathies to all who have lost loved ones, and express our absolute solidarity with individuals affected by the disease and the healthcare workers and front liners who work tirelessly to combat this.

2. Brunei Darussalam too has not been spared. We detected our first case in March, and since then have reported a further 141 cases, and sadly 1 death. Thankfully through a careful program of testing, isolation, contact tracing and treatment, we have managed to control our first few clusters. Although we are well aware that the battle is not yet over, I would like to share two key lessons from our experience in responding to COVID-19.

3. First, I would like to emphasise the importance of enhanced surveillance and testing. Enhanced surveillance mechanisms in place since January meant that Brunei was able to recognize and alert the global health community of an international super-spreading event - the religious gathering cluster in Southeast Asia. Our capacity to control this first wave owes much to our surveillance mechanism supported by rigorous contact tracing
and isolation. We leverage on digital patient records in the national health information management system database that links all healthcare facilities with near 100% penetration of the population. There are dedicated teams for contact tracing comprising trained public health officers and field workers.

4. We are an early adopter of RT-PCR testing in the absence of symptoms, based primarily on epidemiological history. In addition, random sampling is also conducted in community health centers, and among the large foreign worker population. To support this, a sports complex has been converted into a dedicated testing facility and a new Molecular Diagnostic Unit for Respiratory Viruses (built in three weeks) has begun operations, increasing SARS-CoV-2 testing capacity significantly. Our test-per-capita ratio is among the world’s highest. We believe containment efforts are crucial in delaying the onset of widespread community transmission, buying vital time to prepare mitigation measures and build capacity for supporting later stages of the pandemic.

5. Second, very early on, we established a significant public communications strategy with responsiveness and transparency the key pillars of our risk communications plan. Daily press conferences are broadcasted live on national television and social media channels led by the health sector and frequently joined by other ministers to address queries from the press and public. A dedicated 24-hour hotline for public inquiries and a self-screening mobile application integrated with artificial intelligence and data analytic capabilities have also been established. In general, this transparency has won public trust. Civic society has also played a key role and a significant grassroots movement sparked a surge of volunteerism and community advocacy to reinforce our official stance on physical distancing and personal hygiene.

6. Our emphasis on containment along with community engagement has allowed us to control the disease, without resorting to wholesale ‘lockdowns’ of the whole country. Although we have implemented some level of moderate physical distancing such as school closures, prohibition of mass gatherings, mosque closures, and overseas travel restrictions, in general, public services and businesses remain open and no movement restrictions within the country have been imposed.
7. We believe that this combination of targeted approaches alongside aggressive contact tracing and case finding and isolation can be a useful way forward for all countries in the months and perhaps even years ahead. Adopting a phased approach to de-escalation, including gradual relaxation of physical distancing measures and leveraging technology for swift contact tracing, could be a viable strategy to sustain the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

8. In conclusion, countries must continue to work together in a coordinated way to support all our peoples. Keeping open supply chain lines, openness and transparency in data sharing, and ensuring equal access to a vaccine if and when it is available should be a global health priority as none of us are safe, until all of us are safe. We stand ready to work with WHO and the global health community on this important issue.

Thank you.