

OPENING REMARKS
of
Dr. BUI BA BONG, VICE MINISTER,
Vietnam Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
at
The CLRRI-IRRI International Conference Program
“Better Rice, Better Environment and Better Life”
7 September 2007, CLRRI, Cantho, Vietnam

Dear Dr. Robert Zeigler,
Distinguished Vietnamese and international scientists,
Ladies and gentlemen,

At the onset, on behalf of the Vietnam’s Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, I would like to express my warmest greetings to all the Vietnamese and international scientists attending the Conference “Better Rice, Better Environment and Better Life” jointly organized by CLRRI and IRRI today, 7 September 2007 at CLRRI, Cantho, Vietnam. I specially sincerely thank Dr. Robert Zeigler, IRRI Director General and all the international scientists for their very kind response bearing a long travel to come to Cantho for the Conference.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Attending this Conference I feel exciting because of the theme of the Conference “Better Rice, Better Environment and Better Life” and I myself understand the full meaning of the theme that is “We need better rice and better environment for better human life”.

In Vietnam, the whole population has depended on rice as a staple food throughout the past history to the present time and, no doubt, also to the future. The Vietnamese rice economy has an extraordinary development during the last nearly twenty years with a landmark when Vietnam started exporting rice in 1989 after a long period of food deficiency. Since then Vietnam emerged on the map of international rice market as the second largest rice exporter of the world with 4-5 tons of rice exported annually. The success in rice economy development in Vietnam has been rooted in the ground of the renovation policy of the Government, the dedication of Vietnamese farmers and the development and efficient application of rice science. However, the present success of rice production in Vietnam has been challenged by the emerged adverse problems and changing scenario of rice farming.

Firstly, due to industrialization and urbanization the decrease of rice area is alarming. During the last five years, the sowing rice area has decreased 300,000 ha. Such a trend will continue, therefore, a further increase of rice production will be only possible through the increase of productivity provided by more advanced and innovative technologies.

Secondly, there will be a change in food consumption trend as the income per capita of the country increased. Therefore, in term of rice quality demand, there will be also a shift from medium quality rice to high quality rice including rice with higher nutritional values.

Thirdly, rice production generally does not provide a good income for farmers, and the gap of income from rice farming as compared with other industry and service jobs will be wider. This also creates a disparity in income between the rural population and the urban one in the years to come. The increase in price of farm inputs, particularly fertilizers and petrol has been always higher than the increase in rice price. This will again lower the profit from rice farming. Consequently, rice production can help in poverty alleviation but may not bring about prosperity for the rural population.

Fourthly, the farming labor profile in Vietnam is changing with a flow of rural laborers, particularly young people to the urban area. This trend is causing a deficiency of labor force for rice cultivation. So, it is imperative to speed up mechanization of rice production, particularly for rice harvest and drying.

Fifthly, the deterioration of rice ecosystems is also becoming more obvious with high frequency of flood, drought and salinity intrusion and high incidence of insect pests and diseases. The most recent devastating

outbreaks of brown planthopper transmitting viral diseases of grassy stunt and yellowing stunt on rice in the Vietnam's Mekong Delta was a strong indicator of an imbalance in the rice ecosystem in this region after many years of continuous intensification in rice cultivation.

In view of these emerging problems and trends, the focal point of restructuring rice production in Vietnam is aimed at making the rice economy more profitable and rice farmers more prosperous. To achieve this double goal, three strategic areas of development could be envisaged including (i) conservation of rice ecosystems with emphasis on fragile ecosystems, upland and mountainous regions and highly intensive cropping areas (ii) development of innovative technologies to improve both the rice crop and rice-based farming and farm enterprise systems and services, and (iii) adoption of supporting and motivating policy to rice farmers and rice production and marketing. As told earlier, I feel excited by the theme of the Conference "Better Rice, Better Environment, Better Life" because it touches with the strategies of rice development in Vietnam for the time to come. I, therefore, highly appreciate the initiative of IRRI and CLIRRI to organize this Conference and the contribution of all the Vietnamese and international scientists to the Conference. I wish the Conference a great success.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to take the opportunity of my opening remarks to this Conference to highlight the contribution of IRRI to the Vietnamese rice economy. We all may know that 40 years ago the first version of IRRI improved seeds, IR8 was dedicated by IRRI to Vietnam, both the North and the South and locally named as "Nong Nghiep 8" (Agriculture 8) and "Than Nong 8" (Agriculture God 8) in the North and in the South, respectively. The introduction of IR8, a semi-dwarf high yielding variety has triggered a green revolution in rice cultivation of Vietnam. Today, IR64, an excellent version of IRRI seeds, is still being planted in large areas in Vietnam and it is one of the major high quality rice for export.

From IR8 to IR64, over decades, IRRI has been supporting Vietnam in various ways of promotion and application of rice science from supplying rice germplasm and varieties, training Vietnamese scientists, to granting research projects and transferring new technology. The Government of Vietnam highly appreciates the contribution of IRRI to the Vietnamese rice economy and always extends its support to the global international agenda of IRRI.

In this Conference, I would like to take the opportunity to announce that the Minister of Vietnam's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development has awarded the Medal for the Cause of Agriculture and Rural Development to Dr. Robert Zeigler, IRRI Director General and IRRI scientists including Dr. D.S. Brar, Dr. Grant Singleton, Dr. Abdelbagi Ismail, Dr. IL Ryong Choi and Dr. To Phuc Tuong for their outstanding contribution to rice science development in Vietnam and their efforts in strengthening of the cooperation between IRRI and Vietnam. On behalf of the Ministry and the Vietnamese rice scientists, I congratulate Dr. Robert Zeigler and the IRRI scientists for deservedly receiving the prestigious award and wish them all the best in their career.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This Conference is organized in the eve of the 30th anniversary of the Cuu Long Delta Rice Research Institute (CLIRRI). During 30 years, CLIRRI has been a pride of the country for its forefront in rice research and effective contribution to the growth of rice production, particularly for the Vietnam's Mekong Region (Cuu Long Delta) - the rice bowl of the country. On this special occasion, on behalf of the Ministry, I highly praise the dedication of CLIRRI and its scientists and wish the Institute to continuously develop and have a new strength to successfully tackle with the new challenges in rice production.

Lastly, I wish all the participants find this Conference interesting. Thank you.