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SPEECH BY DR YAACOB IBRAHIM, PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY FOR COMMUNICATIONS, AT THE
INTERNATIONAL MUSLIM FOOD AND TECHNOLOGY EXHIBITION (IMFEX) LAUNCH CUM LUNCH OF
IMFEX' 99 6 MAY 1999, 11.30 AM ROYAL CROWNE PLAZA

Mr Umar Hamid, President, Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce and Industry,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

A good afternoon to all of you.

The International Muslim Food and Technology Exhibition (IMFEX) has become one of the major events in Singapore. This year's exhibition, from 4 - 8 November 1999 will be the fifth IMFEX to be staged in Singapore. Allow me first to congratulate the organisers, specifically the Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the supporting agencies, such as TDB, MUIS and STB, for their commitment and perseverance in this endeavour. I am sure many of the participants and the visitors have benefited tremendously from this exhibition.

I would encourage this exhibition to continue to be staged here in Singapore given the fact that we want Singapore to be a major exhibition and conference hub. By providing good infrastructure and services, exhibitors and conference organisers can continue to stage events without much difficulties and hassles. For example, earlier this year I was the guest of honour for the dinner event for Work Boat World Asia'99 exhibition held in Sentosa. The organisers were pleased with the event and the facilities and will continue to have the event here. It is a unique event drawing exhibitors from all over the world. Certainly our goal is not the domestic market but the world market. Hence, exhibitions such IMFEX must draw upon exhibitors and visitors from all over the world. I am glad that this is happening and would urge the organisers to think of new ways to attract foreign exhibitors to Singapore.

All sorts of dishes can be made in a way that makes them Halal food. When we market halal food to the Muslims we should not limit ourselves to run of the mill food items; we must also tap into food cuisines that Muslims usually do not encounter at the dinner table. Similarly, if we want to market halal food to non-Muslims we must make sure that our food product can be marketed as better tasting or healthier

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choice. Indeed, for halal food to grow it must be marketed as an alternative food choice as was done with vegetarian food. Ideally, we should market halal food to everyone – both Muslim and non-Muslim. In this way we would reach a wider audience.

One emerging trend which would enable the marketing of halal food world wide is e-commerce. E-commerce entails the buying and selling of products and services over the Internet. There is an explosion of such activities world wide. Companies such as Amazon.com and e-bay come to mind. Singapore has decided to be an e-commerce hub. Hence on 23 Sept 1998, DPM BG Lee Hsien Loong launched a master plan to create an e-commerce hub in Singapore. The target is to have business worth \$4 billion over the Internet in 5 years time. And to boost the push towards e-commerce, key government services will go on line by 2001. The government is actively encouraging companies to do likewise. According to a Business Times report on 5 May 1999, Singapore's financial institutions are going for e-commerce in a big way.

Using e-commerce halal food suppliers can advertise and take orders world wide. Hence the reach is wider and would include non-Muslim customers. Hence the need to market halal food differently to different target audiences. I believe it would be useful for exhibitions such as this one to show case companies which have successfully made the transition, or expanded their services, via the Internet. Visitors and potential buyers would be given an opportunity to use such Internet-mediated services. And perhaps, more importantly, by showcasing such companies these exhibitions would help other businesses to understand the process of going on to the Net.

The challenge for the organisers, then is how to become a sort of lead agency that promotes the buying and selling of Halal food over the Internet. If every company which has a physical site at the exhibition also has a web site, the impact and reach of the exhibition would increase more than threefold. The organisers could put together say a mall on the Web for these companies to showcase their products. This is the first step towards e-commerce. Subsequently, if a company wants to do e-commerce, we can assist it by bringing it together with government agencies such as NCB.

As you are all aware, there will be a major convention for the Malay/Muslim community on KBE towards the end of this year. One of the topics to be discussed is the transition of Malay companies to the Internet. The organisers, mainly the Malay MPs in collaboration with Malay/Muslim organisations, felt that it was important for our businesses to take advantage of new technologies to enhance their operations and eventually their profits. Clearly our intention is not to encourage this transition just for the sake of hype. Because e-commerce will be one of the major trends of the 21st century we strongly feel that Malay businesses must take advantage of this trend. I am sure this transition will not be easy. But its potential benefits far outweigh the costs involved. Imagine the market reach for halal food. We must sell halal food to everyone and not only Muslims.

The advent of a knowledge-based economy into Singapore is fast becoming a reality. However there seems to be a lack of understanding of KBE. Many equate it with IT and the Web. While some others think that you need to have a Ph.D. to operate in a KBE. As clarified by our Prime Minister during the recent May Day rally, KBE is for everyone. The key is the use of knowledge and information to better do your job or business. However central to KBE is the use of computers as they provide access to the Web which is a repository of information. Hence we need to be computer literate

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and IT-savvy. KBE also means new industries where the value added is information and not material resources. In this regard the push towards technopreneurship is also an attempt to prepare for KBE.

It is important for everyone in our community to understand this new trend. I believe SMCCI has a role to play in ensuring that our business community understands this trend and in helping them to prepare for this new environment. And I would venture one step further; can SMCCI play a role in encouraging new Malay businesses in the high technology areas? I believe it can and should play an active role.

Allow me to give an example. Recently I met a young Malay software programmer working in the Science Park. I asked him if he was keen to start up his own company. He was reluctant. I asked him whether hypothetically speaking, he would be interested in participating in a Malay Science Hub in Geylang. He replied positively. I was a bit troubled by his reply. He seems to want some tailored help from the community. Yet there are opportunities now in the Science Park and eventually there will be more opportunities in the Science Hub to be set up in Buona Vista by our government, which we should take advantage of. We need to close the information loop and help our new start-ups to take the first step. It is not going to be easy. But we need to reach out through public education and personal contacts, to potential Malay businesses in new sectors such as high technology, software development, and the life sciences.

I believe this is an area where SMCCI can play an active role. It can provide information about government assistance and programmes for new start-ups. I just met another young Malay man who is about to make a presentation to NSTB on his business plan for a new process technology in printed circuit boards. I was encouraged by his enthusiasm. He has set up his company in the Science Park and has obtained a government grant to prepare his business plan. I hope he succeeds.

But there may be many more of cases of individuals who are reluctant to make the first step. SMCCI can work together with EDB and NSTB to explain to our community the programmes available to new business aspirants. In this way, we will indirectly encourage Malay businesses in new sectors. These new sectors are the growth areas where new wealth will be created. Our community must also take part in these new areas. I hope SMCCI can consider some of these suggestions as I think we need a community wide effort to re-direct our community focus to new areas of interest.

Thank you.