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Subject: (Embargoed) Speech by Dr Lee Boon Yang, 31 Aug 99, 11.00am

Singapore Government

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SPEECH BY DR LEE BOON YANG
MINISTER FOR MANPOWER

AT THE MANPOWER 21 LAUNCH CEREMONY
ON TUESDAY, 31 AUGUST 99 AT 11AM
AT THE SUNTEC CITY LEVEL 2 AUDITORIUM

Deputy Prime Minister
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning

INTRODUCTION

1 It gives me great pleasure to welcome all distinguished guests to the launch of Manpower 21. In particular, I would like to thank DPM Lee for gracing this occasion.

2 In April last year, the Ministry of Labour was transformed into the Ministry of Manpower to address manpower issues from a national perspective and develop an integrated manpower strategy to support the economy. This transformation took place during a challenging and trying period for Singapore. The economic crisis had slowed down growth, pushed up unemployment and retrenchments to new levels in 1998. Singapore plunged into its first recession since 1986. So as we started out to formulate a long-term manpower strategy, we also had to respond quickly to the immediate problems facing workers. We had to quickly activate mechanisms to tackle rising unemployment, including re-deploying displaced workers, renewing workers' skills, realigning work practices and regaining cost competitiveness. Although the recession was sudden and the impact severe, we were quite clear on the need to look beyond the recession and carefully address Singapore's long term manpower issues. Hence, Manpower 21 was initiated to formulate an overall manpower blueprint for the long-term development of Singapore's workforce.

MANPOWER 21 – A RESPONSE TO CSC

3 Manpower 21 is a direct response to the vision of the Committee on Singapore's Competitiveness, which is to develop a globally competitive workforce to power Singapore into a knowledge based economy. Over the past 30 years, Singapore has been an efficient production base for MNCs and local entrepreneurs. Our training and education infrastructure was geared towards producing an efficient workforce to support these functions. In the 1970s and 1980s, we moved from a labour intensive economy to a capital intensive one as other countries with a much larger labour resource, came into direct competition with us. At the dawn of a new millennium, we are experiencing yet another shift. This time, we are leveraging on knowledge based enterprises. In this new and fast changing environment, it is intellectual capital which will determine the outcome of economic competition.

4 Manpower 21 seeks to address the challenges in manpower development in Singapore under this new paradigm. It includes a comprehensive blue-print which covers worker training and upgrading to meet the demands for new skills in the face of rapid advances in technology, and a constantly changing, highly competitive external environment.

5 In addition, while we push on with our efforts to retrain and upgrade our workers to develop the capabilities to perform value-added work, the environment at the work place must also be conducive so that workers are motivated to work productively. A safe and healthy work environment with strong tripartite relations and sound HR practices will not only serve to enhance the welfare of workers, but are also important tools to retain and attract talents. Another challenge which Manpower 21 seeks to address is therefore to enhance and transform the work environment to improve the productivity of our workforce, elevate competitiveness of businesses and support a better quality of life for Singaporeans.

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6 Finally, despite our willingness to invest in education, skills upgrading and retraining for our people, we will always be hampered by our limited manpower resources. The solution is to supplement our homegrown manpower resource with appropriate foreign manpower. A steady in-flow of international talent will help us to achieve more than what we can do on our own. International talent will help us to create even more job opportunities for our people. However, this process of talent attraction must be carefully managed so as not to weaken our identity and social fabric.

CONCLUSION

7 Manpower 21 is a holistic approach to drive Singapore's manpower development into the next millenium. In the process of formulating the Manpower 21 plan, the work of the Ministry has been redefined. New divisions were set up, and existing ones re-engineered. The Ministry will draw on the resources and participation of the labour movement, employers' organizations and other Government agencies to implement the M21 recommendations. This tripartite approach will also better align the efforts of the key stakeholders towards realizing Manpower 21's vision. The Ministry will continue to take the lead to build on the capabilities of our workforce and augment the local pool with foreign talents where necessary. Our mission is to facilitate and promote the Manpower 21 initiatives to develop a world-class workforce as our key competitive edge.

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