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SPEECH BY DR LEE BOON YANG

MINISTER FOR MANPOWER

AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF

THE ONE-STOP SERVICE COUNTERS

AT THE NEW WORK PERMIT DEPARTMENT

ON SATURDAY, 16 OCT 99 AT 11.15 AM AT

THE MINISTRY OF MANPOWER GROUND FLOOR LOBBY

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen

#### MOM'S COMMITMENT TO PS21

1 The Ministry of Manpower provides extensive services to members of the public, whether as individual worker or employer. The services cover a wide range of areas including job counseling and job placement, conciliation of employment disputes, processing of workmen's compensation and the issue of work passes to foreign workers. We are committed to improving our service quality to all our customers.

2 The Work Permit Department for example, serves more than 5,000 customers each day. The customers who visit the department include local workers, employers, employment agents, and employers of foreign domestic workers as well as foreign workers. Every year, the department performs more than one million transactions, the bulk of which are over-the-counter transactions. The number of such transactions has also grown significantly over the last few years, mainly as a result of the growth in the foreign worker population.

3 At the same time, public expectations are also on the rise. Employers of foreign workers not only want to see their work permit applications processed quickly, they also want the entire work permit application system to be transparent and seamless. This is understandable as a cumbersome and unwieldy work permit system causes wastage and slows down business decisions.

#### BUSINESS PROCESS REENGINEERING IN THE WORK PERMIT DEPARTMENT

4 Hence the Work Permit Department decided to review and reengineer all its business processes. This renewal process started in 1995. To begin with, the Department stripped away existing procedures, went back to first principles and analyzed the core processes that made up its business and then reassembled the pieces more efficiently. The Department focussed its reengineering efforts on better meeting the needs of the customer. The improvements were implemented in phases over the last four years.

5 I would now like to take a few moments to highlight three key improvements. First, applications for work permit can be paperless and hassle-free. With the assistance of IT, employers can apply for work permits in the comfort of their homes or offices via the LabourNet or the Internet.

6 Employers have access to a wide variety of electronic services such as checking their quota balance, applying for and printing out on-the-spot temporary work permits and submitting work permit renewals. The target was for 80% of all work permit applications to be submitted electronically. By the end of September 1999, about 75% of work permit applications were made electronically.

7 In addition, employers of foreign domestic workers now have the option of authorizing the Department to verify their income level without the need to produce hard copies of their latest income tax assessment. This has in-turn helped to reduce manual requests for income tax assessment at the IRAS by up to a third. Medical doctors also have the option of faxing the results of medical examination of foreign workers directly into the work permit system thus eliminating the need for copies to be mailed.

8 A second area of improvement is the reduction in processing time for work permit applications, to one working day if such applications are submitted electronically. The speedy manner in which decisions on work permit applications are processed and conveyed means substantial time savings for employers, and more importantly it removes the window period of uncertainty surrounding the work permit

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9 Third, the number of trips an employer needs to make to the Work Permit Department has been reduced sharply from typically six trips in the past to the current one trip. This excludes the trip the worker needs to make to have his fingerprint impressions taken for the purpose of issuing him with the new work permit identification card. Again this translates into very significant time and money savings for employers.

#### ONE-STOP COUNTER SERVICES

10 Members of the public who need to visit the Work Permit Department can now look forward to better and more efficient counter service in the comfort of the new Work Permit Office. To provide even better services, the Department has restructured all its counter services into one-stop service counters. Customers who need to make enquiries on any work permit matter can now do so at the one-stop information and service area while those who need to make transactions involving the issue, renewal or cancellation of work permits can also do so at one-stop transaction counters. In the past customers would need to queue up at several counters spread over different floors for these transactions or to make enquiries. The new one-stop service counters save our customers much waiting time.

11 I am pleased to note that the waiting times have improved considerably compared to the past when it was common to wait between 60 and 90 minutes. For example, of the 10,000 customers who came to make enquiries at the information and service centre in the month of September, more than 90% were served within 30 minutes with three out of four being served within 15 minutes during the off-peak periods, that is during non-lunch hours.

12 For individual employers, including employers of foreign domestic workers, who came to perform over the counter transactions, the waiting times were comparable if not better - with four out of every five employers being served within 15 minutes during off peak periods. Only those who perform bulk transactions at the counters had longer waiting times.

13 To achieve such efficiency, we had to retrain and reskill our staff. Only better-trained and more knowledgeable staff can provide a faster and higher quality service. I am pleased that the Ministry's staff has taken on the challenge to undergo retraining to prepare themselves for heavier responsibilities. Many staff had been performing the same narrow and sometimes mundane tasks for the last 10-15 years. They were nonetheless prepared to go for retraining and to pick up new knowledge skills. This is very much in the spirit of the Manpower 21 strategy for Lifelong Learning and upgrading to become knowledge workers.

#### CONCLUSION

14 The Work Permit Department's business process reengineering effort is part of the Ministry's overall plan to renew and reinvent itself. The Ministry is currently undergoing a corporate-wide reengineering process involving all departments especially those involved in the delivery of public service. This is an affirmation of our commitment to the challenge of Public Service 21 and to better meet evolving customer needs and expectations. It is also an affirmation of our commitment to continuous improvement in serving the people.

15 Thank you.

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