

Singapore Government

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(AMENDED) SPEECH BY MR WONG KAN SENG, MINISTER FOR
HOME AFFAIRS AT THE PRISONS WORKPLAN SEMINAR 99 ON
WED 12 MAY 99, 9 AM AT THE CDANS COUNTRY CLUB

Director of Prisons

Ladies and Gentlemen.

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I am pleased to note that you have undertaken the challenge to create a new vision to drive the Prisons Department into the new millennium. You are studying new ideas and ways of working even as you maintain the high standard of discipline and control in our institutions.

2 Prisons Department has evolved over the years to become a modern organisation that takes a holistic approach to inmate management and to offering a rewarding career to staff. You have brought technology to your side with the new Prisons Management System. You are beefing up infrastructure and refining plans for the Changi Prison Complex. You are dedicated to developing your staff to their full potential. You are also constantly refining ways and means to reform offenders and help them re-integrate back into society.

Working with families, volunteer organisations and community

3 I particularly commend your work with families, volunteer organisations and the community. As part of the Community Safety and Security Programme, Prisons is working with CDCs to put in place care and support programmes for offenders' families. Formal support structures that have been established by some CDCs include the interim financial and material assistance to the offenders' families, an information and referral service and the befriending of offenders' families by CDC volunteers.

4 The Prisons Department's activities are therefore already contributing to and integrated into the Singapore 21 vision. Though you deal with a specific and special segment of our population, they too count. In fact, the additional effort to help the families of offenders is critical as many of them face more difficult circumstances compared to the average family. It is important for them to know that in difficult times, they can draw strength and support from the community.

Sentencing options

5 Imprisonment is necessary for the protection of society and to exact a price for criminal conduct. On the other hand, if the prisoner was not involved in a serious breach of the law, imprisonment may prove too harsh an option.

6 To look into such concerns, in Apr 97, I asked A/P Ho Peng Kee to chair a committee to study sentencing options that can supplement existing options. Various ministries such as Home Affairs, Law, Community Development, as well as the Judiciary and the Attorney General's Chambers were represented in the committee. The committee has recommended that Community-Based Sentences, or CBS for short, be introduced and made available to the courts. The courts can use these to complement the existing key options of imprisonment, caning and fines, as appropriate to the offender and the offence. The committee has completed its study and the Government has approved its recommendations for implementation.

7 In brief, the recommendations include introducing or expanding the use of Probation, Home Detention with electronic tagging, Community Service Orders, Boot camp and Re-integrative Shaming as additional sentencing options in our criminal justice system.

8 Some of these options are already in use. For example, the probation system is being used for youth offenders. Home Detention is used on early-release drug offenders and reformative trainees. Expanding the application of these sentencing options is a logical step. Suspended sentences and periodic detention were also studied but are not recommended as their benefits are not clearly discernible.

9 CBS will provide for a more comprehensive punishment and rehabilitation system with better gradation in our sentences. It will reduce the need for those who commit less serious offences, especially if it is their first offence, to have

to undergo imprisonment. This will reduce the hardship faced by their families whilst the offender is in prison, along with the stigmatisation that both the offender and his or her family members have to face should he or she be imprisoned. Studies have shown that rehabilitation is also more effective when programmes are carried out in the community as opposed to in prison environment. CBS is hence an integrated and comprehensive sentencing approach and the prisons department will undoubtedly have a big part to play in this system. Let me elaborate on each of these options.

Probation

10 The Courts, together with MCD, have been working to strengthen the current form of probation so that it can be used more widely. In their strengthened form, probation orders are graded according to the offence and the offender's background. The probation orders place tough restrictions and strict obligations on the offender. For example, Community Service Orders (or CSOs) can now be a condition of probation. There are also plans to add Home Detention as another possible probation condition.

Home Detention with Electronic Tagging

11 Under Home Detention, offenders have to remain in their homes during specified hours, especially at night when they are not working. Home Detention at the tail-end of the detention period has already been implemented for certain groups of inmates and will now be expanded to include a wider selection of prisoners. These prisoners can be released slightly earlier on electronic tagging so that their transition from custody back into the community can be managed more effectively.

12 Home Detention as a front-end option, i.e. as a direct sentencing option used by the Courts, is also recommended for first-time and minor offenders to keep them away from the "contaminating" influences of hardened criminals.

Community Service Orders (CSOs)

13 Under CSOs, the Courts may order an offender to perform a community task without remuneration for a stipulated number of hours. CSOs are recommended as they allow the offenders to make restitution to the community for the wrong they have done. Offenders may develop empathy and compassion for the needy whom they assist, as well as a sense of civic consciousness. Currently, CSOs are imposed on juveniles and some probationers. They will be extended to other adult offenders incrementally.

Boot Camp

14 Boot camps generally combine a brief prison experience with

subsequent probation supervision. In Singapore, the Juvenile Court organised a pilot boot camp for youth offenders in Jun/Jul 96. Boot camp will be introduced for male and female young offenders aged between 16 and 21 years. Such boot camps will emphasise rehabilitation, which we hope will increase the chances of these young offenders being reformed.

Reintegrative Shaming

15 The focus here will be on shaming as a reintegrative element in "Rehabilitative Conferencing" sessions involving both the offender and victim. This will be an extension of family conferencing currently used by the Courts for juvenile offenders. It provides the offender with an opportunity to accept responsibility for his offending behaviour and the victim an opportunity to contribute to the cautioning process and work through his or her emotions.

Government NOT going 'soft' on criminal behaviour

16 These CBS options mark an evolution of our criminal justice system. But let me emphasise at this point that the Government is not going 'soft' on offenders or criminal behaviour. We are mindful that the indiscriminate use of CBSs could diminish the deterrent effect of our tough laws, sense of public security and confidence in our criminal justice system.

17 Hence, we will proceed cautiously and focus initially on extending the scope of CBSs already in use and meting out CBSs in combination with other CBSs or other sentencing options. Over the next six months, we will be expanding the use of the revamped probation system and tail-end Home Detention. Thereafter, we will be implementing Boot Camp and Rehabilitative Conferencing. We will also implement the concurrent sentencing of an offender to both Home Detention and CSOs first before we consider Home Detention and CSOs as stand alone options.

18 Offenders who are placed on CBS and who subsequently breach the terms of their sentence will face serious consequences. For example, for those under Home Detention, Prisons Department intend to put in place provisions to allow its Superintendents or Director to forfeit a significant portion of the remission of prisoners who breach the Home Detention conditions.

19 We will also continue to carry out tough measures against recalcitrant inmates who show indifference to rehabilitation. The Long Term Detention of drug offenders, which took effect from July last year was introduced to put hardcore drug addicts out of circulation to protect our society against the menace of drug abuse and drug pushing.

Take on the challenges

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20 1999 will be a challenging year, as the economic and political situations of the region have yet to return to previous levels of confidence. As you redefine your vision, put in careful thought to ensure that the foundations are solid and will hold fast in the years to come.

21. I wish you all the best in the year ahead and a fruitful Workplan Seminar.

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