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SPEECH BY MR MAH BOW TAN, MINISTER FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, AT THE OPENING CEREMONY
OF THE

CONFERENCE OF THE ASEAN FEDERATION OF ENGINEERING ORGANISATIONS (CAFE0) ON Friday, 19
NOVEMBER 99 AT 9.55 AM

AT THE SHANGRI-LA HOTEL

lifelong Learning Crucial in Knowledge-Based Economy

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Er. Ong Ser Huan, President IES;

Distinguished Guests;

Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is my pleasure to address this distinguished gathering of engineers from
the ASEAN region.

2 This Conference, coming in the aftermath of the Asian economic crisis, is
especially timely. As ASEAN recovers from the economic crisis, there will be new
challenges and opportunities for your respective countries, and for your profession.

3 When industrialisation took off in the ASEAN region in the second half of this century, engineering was a driving force for economic development and growth. The engineering profession contributed in a big way to the progress and development of ASEAN nations. Your imprint is evident in countless infrastructure projects, such as ports, airports, roads, telecommunications and commercial, industrial and housing developments. The challenge in the next millennium is for engineering to continue to be an engine of growth for our respective economies.

4 As the region recovers from the economic crisis, ASEAN countries will be in various stages of restructuring their economies. In so doing, an important strategy is to achieve competitiveness through science and technology. Such an environment presents ample opportunities for engineers, with their specialised knowledge of technology, to play a leading role. A dynamic engineering profession can help boost the economic engines of ASEAN countries and place them firmly on the path of steady economic growth once again.

5 This leads to a second challenge, which is the need to keep pace with the global trend towards a knowledge-based economy – an economy in which relevant knowledge and skills are the key resources, more so than the traditional labour and capital. In a knowledge-based economy, a well-trained, creative and “thinking” workforce that embraces the practice of lifelong learning will play an increasingly crucial role in determining economic growth and prosperity. As professional engineers, you must continuously update your knowledge and upgrade your skills to keep pace with the rapidly changing needs of a global marketplace.

6 This need to constantly stay current is no longer a matter of choice, especially in the age of information technology or IT. Indeed, for many fields of engineering directly related to IT, such as microelectronics and computer networking, continuing education or lifelong learning is crucial in keeping the professionals relevant to meeting the needs of their industry. Given the ever-shrinking life-span of IT products, engineers in research & development, and in production lines, have little choice but to keep themselves updated.

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Even in the more fundamental fields of engineering, such as civil & mechanical engineering, the application of IT is advancing rapidly. For example, it was not too long ago that most design offices produced engineering drawings manually, using tee-squares and set-squares. Nowadays, most use computer-aided drafting software. Lately, however, the use of object-based drawing has been fast catching up and our engineers and draftsmen will have to embrace this new technology very soon if they want to stay competitive.

7 Lifelong learning is therefore critical to professional success in today's fast-changing environment. This is especially so for the engineering profession. The Professional Engineers Board (PEB) will therefore be introducing a system of continuing professional development to ensure that engineers in Singapore keep abreast of developments in their respective fields. Under this system, our professional engineers will be expected to meet a prescribed number of professional development hours before they can renew their practising certificates. PEB is currently working out details of the system and these will be announced sometime

next year.

In the meantime, professional bodies can continue to play an important role by encouraging and helping our engineers to stay current. The Institution of Engineers, Singapore (IES), for instance, conducts comprehensive year-round continuing professional development programmes which I understand have been well received by its members.

8 The third challenge is to adjust to the global trend towards open markets and free trade. ASEAN has committed itself to a liberalised trading regime under WTO and the ASEAN Free Trade Area. Freeing up trade in professional services, including engineering services, is on the cards. As economies open up and markets become borderless, engineers in the region will have to find ways to hold their own against stiffer competition. Pooling of resources for a stronger presence in the region could be one possible solution to face up to the competition. There will be many opportunities for engineers in the region to increase co-operation with each other. Your knowledge of the workings of the region and your cultural familiarity with one another can be harnessed to your advantage.

Whatever strategies you might choose to adopt, always remember that in order to succeed in an open and borderless market, you must benchmark your practice against the best in the world.

9 I am confident that engineers in the ASEAN region will be able to rise up to meet the challenges ahead and to seize the opportunities that will come your way in the years ahead.

10 It is now my pleasure to declare the Conference open. I wish all of you fruitful discussions over the next 2 days and every success for the future. I also wish you an enjoyable stay in Singapore.

11 Thank you. National Archives of Singapore

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