SPEECH BY PRESIDENT TONY TAN KENG YAM AT THE LAUNCH OF THE HARMONY IN DIVERSITY GALLERY ON 2 SEPTEMBER 2016 AT ANNEX B, MND BUILDING

Mr Teo Chee Hean Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for National Security

Mr K Shanmugam
Minister for Home Affairs and Law

Ms Grace Fu
Minister for Culture, Community and Youth

Ladies and Gentlemen

OVERCOMING SINGAPORE'S COMMUNAL HISTORY

It is my pleasure to be here this evening to launch the Harmony in Diversity Gallery.

2 September is a significant day in Singapore's communal history. On this day in 1964, Singapore experienced a second series of communal riots after the first riot in July 1964. 36 people died as a result of the two riots in 1964.

Many of us, especially younger Singaporeans, may have forgotten this part of our history. After the riots, the Government and pioneer Singaporeans worked hard to ensure that communal violence would no longer haunt Singapore. As a result, we have enjoyed decades of racial and religious harmony. Our diverse communities now live side-by-side in multi-cultural neighbourhoods, our children go to schools where they interact with friends of different cultures and religions and workplace diversity is a common feature in Singapore.

This is not a minor achievement. Studies have shown that Singapore is one of the most religiously diverse countries in the world. Yet, our different religious communities are able to co-exist peacefully. In many parts of Singapore, we can find churches, Chinese temples, Hindu temples and mosques located harmoniously in close proximity to one another. In fact, right next to this gallery is Telok Ayer Street, one of Singapore's earliest 'streets of harmony', where you can find Thian Hock Keng Temple, Al-Abrar

Mosque, Telok Ayer Chinese Methodist Church and the Nagore Durgah (now the Indian Muslim Heritage Centre) along the same street.

We must not take the hard-fought harmony we enjoy today for granted. Our experience with communal riots and tensions show that such harmony does not occur naturally, nor is its continuity a given.

It is the result of conscious, determined efforts by successive generations to promote mutual understanding, respect and accommodation.

SGSECURE – COMMUNITY EFFORT TO SAFEGUARD OUR WAY OF LIFE

Given the inter-connectedness of global events, our communal harmony can be threatened by external forces. Hence, to maintain harmony in Singapore, our policies and approaches on race and religion will need to evolve in response to different challenges and threats. For example, after we uncovered the Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist network in Singapore in 2001, the Government formed the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles or IRCCs in 2002. We saw the urgency then to promote racial and religious harmony and to strengthen social cohesion. Over the years, IRCC leaders and members have worked hard to build bridges of trust and understanding across communities.

Today, the terrorism threat has grown more significant. Given the sharper racial and religious undertones in terrorist attacks, our efforts to build up vigilance and resilience against the terrorist threat need to be firmly grounded by our society remaining cohesive, and increasing mutual understanding and acceptance of our diverse cultures, race and religions. The role of the community is therefore of utmost importance in countering terrorism.

In this regard, the Government will be launching the SGSecure movement later this month which is the community's response to counter terrorism. There are three pillars to the movement – Community Vigilance, Community Cohesion and Community Resilience. These three pillars form the call to action to the community in order to safeguard our way of life.

GALLERY AS A NODE FOR COMMUNITY COHESION

The Harmony in Diversity Gallery exemplifies what the SGSecure movement is about. It is the community identifying what is important to Singapore and developing solutions to preserve and strengthen our values and way of life.

The youth wing of the Inter-religious Organisation (or the IRO) mooted the idea last year to create this Gallery. They were concerned that it would be much harder in future to foster mutual respect and understanding amongst younger Singaporeans if there is no basic knowledge and awareness of the major religions in Singapore and the common values which binds us together.

I would like to commend the collective effort of various community partners and stakeholders - the IRO, academic advisers and government agencies for your commitment and sharing of expertise in co-creating this Gallery to commemorate our heritage in preserving our religious harmony and diversity. I would also like to thank the S Rajaratnam Endowment which has agreed to sponsor and support the outreach and engagement programmes by the Gallery.

I am confident that the Gallery will be an important public education facility to help foster learning about Singapore's religious harmony and diversity. Through the gallery, Singaporeans, particularly the younger generation, will appreciate that maintaining harmony in multi-cultural and multi-religious Singapore is always an on-going and deliberate effort which requires everyone to play our part.

CONCLUSION

Our communal harmony today remains a work-in-progress that must be consciously tended. It should be a lifetime enterprise for all Singaporeans and our legacy to the generations after us. I hope this Gallery will be the spark that ignites all Singaporeans to work together to keep Singapore secure.

It is now my pleasure to declare the Harmony in Diversity Gallery open.