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**SPEECH BY PRESIDENT HALIMAH YACOB AT THE TOTAL
DEFENCE DAY COMMEMORATION EVENT AND CIVILIAN
WAR MEMORIAL SERVICE ON THURSDAY, 15 FEBRUARY
2018, 9.30AM, AT WAR MEMORIAL PARK**

Minister Ong Ye Kung, Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills) and
Second Minister for Defence

Mr Roland Ng, President, Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry

Distinguished guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning

On 15 February 1942, Singapore fell to Japan. The three years and eight months of Japanese Occupation that followed was a time of unspeakable horror, deprivation and suffering. Many civilians lost their lives. We gather here today to commemorate and pay tribute to them. Some of them may have been our parents, grandparents, relatives or friends. We learn about them through those who survived the war, such as 87 year-old Mr Chia Chew Soo. Mr Chia was only 11 when the Japanese raided his family's farm in Ayer Rajah and killed eight members including his father on 14 February 1942, which was the eve of Chinese New Year. Mr Chia himself was bayoneted multiple times, buried with other victims and left to die. He regained consciousness two days later and miraculously survived after digging himself out. Today, Mr Chia still carries those bayonet scars and shares his experiences with his family through the many drawings he has done over the years. Survivors such as Mr Chia carry stories of what can happen if our defences fail. Through them, we learn the price of not being able to defend our home.

Since 1984, we mark Total Defence Day on the 15th of February every year to remind ourselves that as an independent nation, defence is our own responsibility. We must do our utmost to protect our sovereignty and way of life. Indeed, one of the first things we did after our independence in 1965 was to build up our own defence force. Two years later, National Service was introduced to strengthen our defence. Today, we have a strong Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) capable of defending Singapore and safeguarding our peace and stability that we enjoy.

Over the years, Total Defence has evolved to become a rallying effort for everyone to play their part in times of challenges and crises. It continues to be our best response to potential threats such as self-radicalisation or a cyberattack. In the current security environment, we can no longer just rely on security agencies to ring-fence these threats. Everyone – at work, in school or at home – has a part to play. It may be as simple as keeping a look out for one another or helping someone in need, but every effort counts. Total Defence has helped us ride through past challenges such as the Al Qaeda terror threat in 2001, the SARS outbreak in 2003 and the global financial crisis a few years after. Total Defence has also made us stronger as a nation. What we need now is to be aware of the new threats, know what to do when something happens and be prepared. More importantly, we cannot rest on our laurels.

As we gather here today, this occasion is also an appropriate opportunity for us to reaffirm the principles of multiracialism. The memorial which stands before us is testament to our multicultural ties – the four tapering columns symbolise the shared experiences and unity among the people of different races in Singapore during the war. We have all heard accounts of how people helped one another, sharing food out of the little they had, or protecting their neighbours from being hurt or captured. This legacy of racial harmony will continue to underpin the strength and cohesion of our society, especially as it grows in diversity and complexity. It will help fortify us and keep us resilient even in the face of a crisis.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A strong defence is the cornerstone of the peace, progress and prosperity of our nation. We started building our defence from scratch. Today, we can be proud to say that we have a good defence. We must sustain our efforts, including a strong support for National Service.

The road ahead will have its fair share of challenges. The next generation will have to find their own ways to take Singapore forward, especially in Total Defence. But if they face the future with the same courage and fortitude as our forefathers, treasuring the importance of multiracialism and total defence, I am confident that Singapore will remain strong, secure and sovereign for generations to come.

Thank you.