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**WELCOME ADDRESS BY PRESIDENT HALIMAH YACOB AT
THE INAUGURATION OF THE ROSES OF PEACE
AMBASSADOR PROGRAMME AND FAITH IN LEADERSHIP
SYMPOSIUM ON SUNDAY, 25 FEB 2018 AT AMARA HOTEL**

Mohamed Irshad, Founder and President of the Roses of Peace

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentleman

A very good morning to everyone. I am happy to attend this morning's inauguration ceremony of the Roses of Peace Ambassador Programme and Faith in Leadership Symposium.

2. Today's inauguration ceremony marks an important milestone for Roses of Peace (or ROP) – a youth-led, ground-up initiative aimed at spreading the message of peace and harmony to foster a more cohesive society.

Building Bridges between Communities

3. Organisations such as the ROP play an important role as bridges between our communities. This role is even more crucial now, as the world is experiencing increasing uncertainty and threats to social cohesion. Globally, extremism has not only claimed innocent lives but also divided communities. Closer to home, the threat of self-radicalisation has become ever so real and it is the responsibility of every Singaporean to be proactive in combating threats and staying vigilant at all times.

4. As a multi-cultural and multi-religious society, Singapore is even more susceptible to these developments than other countries. Any social fissures that develop within our community may quickly ripple through our entire nation and cause unrest. It is therefore important that we make every effort to reach out, build bridges and understand one another better. We should remain united as a nation and embrace the diversity of our ethnicity and faiths.

5. We can start by encouraging positive social exchanges across different races and religious groups. We must keep our Singapore story alive by weaving into our social fabric, more meaningful interactions across different faith and community groups. Let our diversity be a strength, rather than a threat to our social cohesion.

6. Over the years, the Government has provided opportunities for different communities to come together and achieve this. Today, at both the national and community level, we have a number of platforms and initiatives for different communities to build mutual respect, strengthen trust and deepen understanding.

7. For example, the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (or IRCC) play an important role in fostering networks of trust between different groups. These networks, present at every constituency, enable leaders from different communities to gather regularly, share views and deepen trust and understanding. I am heartened that

several ROP members attended the recent inaugural IRCC Convention 2018, which I officiated a few weeks ago.

Supporting Ground-Up Initiatives

8. However, given the new threats and challenges, relying on initiatives by the Government alone is not sufficient. There is a need for more ground-up efforts to complement the national and community programmes. Ground-up initiatives tend to be more agile and nimble, and are able to quickly rally support as well as respond to new trends or issues. By working together, we will also be able to enlarge our common space, connect with others and bond with one another.

9. This was how ROP began. In 2012, following the publications on caricatures of Prophet Muhammad in France, huge protests broke out in many cities. Several tertiary students approached ROP Founder, Mohammed Irshad, to suggest doing something to also register their unhappiness with these publications. However, instead of staging a protest, Irshad suggested organising a peaceful

campaign to highlight the universal message of peace that all religions promoted. Thanks to Irshad, the energies surrounding an unhappy incident were artfully channelled to a good cause.

10. Over the years, ROP has grown in strength and size, reaching out to a growing number of people. To date, the ROP has engaged more than 1,200 youth volunteers from diverse faiths and distributed over 35,000 roses. It has also organised a variety of workshops, forums and conferences to provide young people with a platform to engage and have open discussions on inter and intra faith harmony and unity.

11. One example is the “Faith in Action” conference held last July. It brought together panellists from various backgrounds to share how our diverse societal make-up can be a positive tool towards building a cohesive and inclusive community. Such discussion platforms are vital in promoting continuous dialogue between different groups and further deepening our understanding of one another.

Empowering Youth Leaders of Tomorrow

12. The appointment of Peace Ambassadors today marks another significant step in advancing the message of peace. Apart from community and religious leaders, youths play a critical role in safeguarding our nation's social cohesion. Youths are the future of our society, and we need them to understand the importance of building trust and respect in our community. We need our youths to reach out to one another, to better understand one another and embrace the diversity in our society. We need more youths to step forward and be active advocates for peace. On this note, I would like to share three suggestions as you embark on the journey ahead.

13. First, start small. Don't feel pressured to do something big or grandiose. All major changes in society begin with something small.

Identify small but high-impact projects, and work from there. For example, we can try connecting with others in the online space, to spread the meaningful message of further embracing our diversity.

14. Second, and on a related note, dream big. Be bold and have the moral gumption to stand up for what you believe in. And act on it. As Peace Ambassadors, you can make a difference, so do not shy away from embarking on initiatives and projects that can make an impact.

15. Third, walk the talk ourselves. In order to effectively spread the message of peaceful co-existence, it is important to first strengthen our own understanding and appreciation of our rich differences. This will allow us to gain deeper respect and engage more meaningfully with one another. Take time to greet our Chinese neighbours with well wishes during Chinese New Year. Find out more about other festivals

like Easter and Deepavali from our Christian and Indian friends respectively. Offer a listening ear to your Muslim friends on their religious practices. This will allow you to gain a deeper respect of one another's faiths and ethnicity.

Conclusion

16. To the newly appointed Peace Ambassadors, I wish you the very best as you embark on this new journey. I look forward to hearing your success stories and projects. It is an important step that you are taking, in volunteering to advocate peace and social cohesion. I thank you for putting yourself up for this role. By coming together, I am confident that we can strengthen our resilience as a community.

17. My heartiest congratulations too, to the ROP Management Committee, for developing this meaningful programme and organising today's Symposium.

18. I wish everyone an enriching day ahead at today's Faith in Leadership Symposium.

Thank you.