



# SPEECH

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## **Speech by Mr Matthias Yao Chih, Minister of State for Defence, at the Grassroots Leaders' Visit to Tuas Naval Base**

23 Nov 1997

### **The need for national commitment and support for defence**

Singapore has come a long way since our independence. Today, we can be proud of our successes. From a small fishing village, Singapore has progressed and now ranked among the most competitive economies in the world. We have full employment and our people are affluent and enjoy a high standard of living. Despite the financial turmoil around our region, we are relatively unaffected. Beyond this crisis, we will emerge with an even stronger economy. All these would never be possible if not for the support, dedication and commitment of each and every Singaporean.

However, it must be remembered that Singapore will remain vulnerable because of its small size and lack of natural resources. The peace and prosperity that we have been enjoying should never be taken for granted. We just have to look at other parts of the world to see how quickly a country can be plunged into chaos and destruction. If we let our guard down, what we have achieved over the last 30 years can very easily be destroyed overnight. Singaporeans must understand that a credible defence force is the bedrock for the continued peace, progress and prosperity for the country. A strong SAF will provide stability and a climate of confidence. We must also show that we are committed to maintaining a strong and credible defence capability.

### **The part played by grassroots leaders in promoting greater defence awareness**

Grassroots leaders play a pivotal role in conveying these defence messages. You are the link for the SAF to the community. Being respected opinion leaders amongst the community, you are in the most privileged position to convey the need for a strong SAF and the rationale behind our need to always maintain high standards of operational readiness.

MINDEF appreciates your dedication and wholehearted support for the SAF's defence efforts. I'm happy to note that through your hard work, the community has not only become more aware of the need for defence, but also the need to take a more active and participative interest in the support for defence.

Today's visit is the eighth in the series of defence familiarization visits organized since 1995. This is an ongoing effort by MINDEF to enhance your understanding of the developments and operational capabilities of the SAF. Through these updates, you will become more informed and also better equipped to explain the rationale behind the SAF's defence efforts and its need to train and invest in cutting-edge technology. Such investments will enhance the multiplier effect on our operational capabilities.

### **The SAF and 30 years of National Service**

This year is significant to the SAF as it marks the commemoration of 30 years of National Service. This is a significant milestone in the nation building history of Singapore. In many ways, the SAF reflects the development of Singapore. We only have two regular infantry battalion when we started. Our Navy was in no better shape. It had only two naval vessels, a wooden training ship and a former police vessel. Our Air Force had no combat aircraft when they first started. Three decades later, the SAF is now an integrated Armed Force capable of fighting together to defend Singapore from land, sea and air attack. It has also grown to its present strength of some 300,000 men of whom 250,000 are NSmen.

The proficiency of our NSmen in military skills is well-known already. Whenever they come for in-camp training, they maintain a high standard of performance. But what I am particularly proud of is the way our NSmen can use their training and knowledge to organise themselves in a difficult situation. During the tense situation in Cambodia in early-May 97 when hostilities broke out between forces loyal to the two rival PMs, the SAF mounted Operation Crimson Angel to evacuate over 400 Singaporeans from Cambodia.

The operation was a success. The evacuation was carried out smoothly, effectively and professionally. But behind the scene, there is another success story which few people know about. Many of the male Singaporeans who were in Cambodia at that time are NSmen. They are all familiar with SAF's system of mobilisation, planning for a mission, controlling its execution and how to anticipate and react quickly to instructions. Together with the embassy staff, they organised themselves and set up a "Warden" system similar to the SAF's mobilisation system. They worked with our embassy in Phnom Penh to maintain a register of all the Singaporeans in Cambodia, where they lived and how to contact them in a hurry should there be an evacuation. They grouped the Singaporeans according to their residences. Each group was headed by a Warden Officer, and assisted by a 2IC.

They established meeting points for each group, and worked out the best and safest routes to take to the airport. Upon actual activation by the embassy, the Warden Officer contacted those in his group by telephone or directly. Each group then moved to designated meeting points where they were transported by bus or car to the Main Command Centre at Cambodiana Hotel where our embassy staff took over. At the Command Centre, they were

further organised into packets and transported by bus to the Airport for the evacuation by the inbound C130. Not only did our NSmen plan the first part of the evacuation in great detail among themselves and carried it out with clockwork precision, the way they and their families acted during the crisis and the evacuation was also inspiring.

During the evacuation at the airport, there was no panic or rush amongst the Singaporeans. They were orderly and organised throughout the entire procedure. They understood the need to stick to the plan, and subjected themselves to instructions and security checks with full co-operation. They knew that discipline was important in such a situation, they had faith in their own plan and in the SAF's evacuation procedure, and they were well trained to handle any crisis calmly and confidently. The men were brought together by chance. They were not from the same SAF unit. Most of them did not even know each other before. But because of the common, vigorous training they received in the SAF, they could quickly respond together cohesively as one organised group. This is the best evidence that our NSmen are operationally ready, and can exercise good initiative in any crisis.

### **The vital role of the Republic of Singapore Navy**

In this morning's visit, we hope to give you an in-depth understanding of the capabilities of the Navy and its role in the seaward defence of Singapore. The Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN) safeguards our territorial waters and ensures that our sea lines of communication remain safe and secure. This is a very heavy responsibility, as 90% of Singapore trade comprises sea-borne trade involving items ranging from raw materials to vital supplies like food and fuel.

To achieve its mission in the seaward defence of Singapore, the Navy ensures that it is a technologically advanced and well-trained force. It strives to ensure that it has the best equipment and manpower. The Navy is always looking for ways to ensure that it retains the cutting edge. This is evident in the Navy's new acquisitions, like the Sjoorman Class Submarine, new class of Patrol Vessels (PV)s, and upgrading of its Missile Gunboats. The Navy also has highly trained people who are able to harness modern technology and maintain a high state of operational readiness. Regular naval exercises are also conducted with foreign Navies to sharpen and validate our doctrines and tactics.

The Navy also works very closely with the Army and the Air Force, operating and functioning effectively as part of the balanced and well-integrated SAF. As an example, the Navy provides support for Army exercises by transporting troops and equipment for both local and overseas exercises. The Navy also operates frequently with the Air Force which provide maritime surveillance in support of the Navy's mission. This integration is especially critical in maintaining the SAF's effective and integrated warfare capabilities.

We have included visits onboard the Navy's Mine Countermeasures Vessels (MCMV) and Missile Corvettes for you in today's visit. You will be able to witness for yourselves, the operational capabilities of these vessels. Such first hand experiences bear testimonies of the Navy's operational capabilities, the crucial factor upon which public confidence is built on.

## **Conclusion**

MINDEF hopes to see your continuous support for its efforts in helping the Singaporean public realize the critical need for defence. The process of building public confidence might be a long struggle but let me assure you that it will be well worth the effort. Singapore's continued well-being and future success lie in the hands of each and every Singaporean and we must rely on ourselves to ensure this.

## **News Release:**

- Grassroots Leaders - Important Link between SAF and Community (MINDEF\_19971123001.pdf)

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