



SPEECH

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Ministerial Statement on Full-time National Service Duration

15 Jun 2004

Introduction

Mr Speaker Sir,

Singapore introduced National Service 37 years ago in 1967, just two years after independence. With a small population, we needed National Service to build up a credible SAF in order to deter potential aggressors and protect the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of our small and vulnerable nation. This remains as vital today as it was in the early days of our nationhood.

The peace and prosperity that Singapore has enjoyed over the past four decades have been built on the dedication of the generations of National Servicemen who have served since then. About 680,000 Singaporeans have served National Service in the Singapore Armed Forces, Police Force and Civil Defence Force. Sons now follow their fathers through this rite of passage in which our boys become men as they learn to defend our nation.

Singaporeans understand and accept the need for National Service. Our young men want to do their best when they serve. They put in the extra effort in order to take on the challenge and responsibility of becoming commanders.

Review of Full-Time National Service Duration

The duration of full-time National Service depends on two factors: how long it takes to train soldiers and commanders to be operationally proficient in their duties, and how large a standing force we need, i.e., how many full-time units we need for defence and contingency purposes during peacetime.

Since 1971, we have required National Servicemen who are promoted to the rank of Corporal

and higher to serve 2 1/2 years of full-time National Service while all other National Servicemen serve for 2 years. All National Servicemen who have attained A-level and Diploma qualifications or higher are promoted to at least the rank of Corporal and therefore serve 2 1/2 years of full-time National Service.

Over the years MINDEF has periodically reviewed the training methods and operational deployment requirements. We want to ensure that on the one hand, the SAF is always ready to carry out its missions, while on the other hand, National Servicemen spend no more time than is necessary to carry out their NS duties. In other words, we aim to keep the period of full-time National Service not longer than what is necessary for our defence needs.

Sir, MINDEF has recently carried out a thorough review of the full-time National Service duration. MINDEF has concluded that it can reduce the full-time National Service duration for those who currently have to serve 2 1/2 years by 6 months, to 2 years, while maintaining the operational readiness of the SAF and its ability to fulfil its mission. This means that all National Servicemen will therefore serve 24 months or 2 years of full-time National Service.

Two key factors come together to make such a change feasible now: first, the key driver for this change is the transformation to the 3rd Generation SAF, and second, the key enabler for this change is a surge in the National Service intake over the next 10 years.

Transformation to the 3rd Generation SAF

Sir, we have steadily built up the SAF into a potent fighting force, operating modern, sophisticated and technologically advanced systems. And, as I informed Members in the Committee of Supply this year, MINDEF will be moving beyond this to transform the SAF over the next decade into the 3rd Generation SAF. The 3G SAF will be a military force that makes greater use of superior technology in areas such as comprehensive surveillance, battle-field awareness, precision strike and network-centric warfare. The 3rd Generation SAF will rely less on numbers of soldiers, and more on the higher education levels and capabilities of our National Service soldiers.

While this transformation will take a decade to unfold, it is already underway and bearing fruit. One example of this is the Apache Longbow helicopter. The Apache's radar, guided missiles and data links between helicopters are an example of battlefield awareness, precision strike and network-centric warfare. The Apache transforms the battle into an asymmetric helicopter versus tank battle, allowing tanks to be destroyed at long range. Another example is the Army's new Primus self-propelled howitzer, which requires only one-third of the crew but is far more mobile and delivers greater firepower. Our investments in research and development and new systems will pave the way for such transformations not just at the unit and tactical level but also at the operational and strategic levels.

The transformation of the SAF is the key driver that allows us to transit to a shorter NS duration. With the transformation of the SAF, more National Servicemen will be deployed in

positions which are more challenging and make better use of their education and training, while serving a shorter period of full-time National Service.

Surge in NS Intake

The second key factor is the coming surge in the National Service intake. This is the enabler that allows us to make the transition to a shorter NS duration now. There will be a 15% to 20% increase in the annual intake of full-time National Servicemen over ten years starting from 2006. This surge is a result of the higher number of births per year starting in the 'Dragon' year of 1988 and lasting till 1997. This surge in NS intake over the next ten years will allow us to maintain our operational readiness and standing force requirements even as we move to a 24-month National Service system and carry out the transformation towards the leaner 3rd Generation SAF.

Maintaining SAF Operational Readiness

For officers and section commanders, a 24-month full-time National Service period is needed. This will allow for up to 12 months of training, and at least another 12 months of deployment for operational duties. For non-commanders, a 24-month period is sufficient to train a battalion for operations and to meet our standing force requirement.

Improvement in Training Effectiveness

The SAF's training and operational standards will be maintained even with the 6 month reduction. Over the years, the SAF has significantly improved its training effectiveness through the introduction of new systems and technologies. For example, today, a recruit at the new Basic Military Training Centre in Pulau Tekong learns how to shoot on the Individual Marksmanship Trainer which is within marching distance in his camp. His shooting technique can be analysed, corrected and improved on this marksmanship trainer before he goes to the live-firing range. In the old days, a recruit could spend the whole day out at the range, mostly waiting for his turn to shoot just ten rounds; and at the end, he would not really know why he shot well or why he shot badly, nor how to improve. Simulators and trainers have also proven effective for drivers, tank crews and signallers. And we have provided more efficient and focused training for commanders with the introduction of wargaming systems. The use of such simulators, war games and Computer Aided Instruction has enhanced training effectiveness while saving time.

The SAF's operational readiness and its ability to achieve its mission will also be maintained. The investments we are making in transforming to the 3G SAF and the new capabilities we are developing will enable us to maintain a strong SAF and reduce our dependence on large numbers of full-time National Servicemen. This reduced NS duration of 24 months will be sustainable over the long term.

I would also like to thank Members of this House for their continuing strong support for national defence. Despite the economic challenges Singapore has faced in the last few years, this House has remained fully committed to national defence. This year, the budget caps of all ministries were reduced by 2%, except for MINDEF. And Members of this House have, during the Budget Debate, robustly re-affirmed the need for a strong SAF.

Implementation

Sir, let me now address the implementation details. MINDEF will implement the revised 24-month full-time NS duration with effect from the batch of National Servicemen who will be enlisted in December 2004, that is, at the end of this year.

To minimise transitional anomalies where servicemen who enlist later complete their full-time NS before those who enlist earlier, there will be a graduated reduction in duration for batches enlisted earlier than the December 2004 batch.

Those who are enlisted between June and November this year for 2 1/2 years of full-time National Service will get a four-month cut in full-time NS duration. Full-time National Servicemen who are currently serving their 2 1/2 years of service will get up to a two-month cut in service duration. I say up to a 2-month cut because the earliest date that the ORD for these in-service National Servicemen can be brought forward to will be 30 June 2004, to allow time for the units to do their administrative out-processing arrangements.

Full-time National Servicemen returning from disruption to serve out the balance of their 2 1/2 years of full-time National Service will also be given a corresponding cut in their NS duration based on the cohort in which they were enlisted.

There will be no change for those serving two years of full-time National Service.

The current 8 week reduction in National Service duration given to National Servicemen who have attained a pre-enlistment fitness level of at least a NAPFA Silver will remain. This 8-week reduction for fit enlistees will be granted in two parts - 4 weeks at the beginning of their service during the Basic Military Training phase, and 4 weeks at the end of their full-time National Service period.

The Ministry of Home Affairs will be implementing the corresponding changes for National Servicemen currently serving in or who will be enlisted into the Singapore Police Force and the Singapore Civil Defence Force.

MINDEF will be working with our local universities to better align the university intake schedules from 2007 when the first batch of National Servicemen serving the new NS duration completes their full-time National Service.

Conclusion

Sir, the rapid advance of technology and new war-fighting concepts have made it possible for us to carry out a transformation to the 3rd Generation SAF and reduce the duration of full-time National Service. The surge in National Service intake over the next ten years enables us to maintain the SAF's operational readiness while making this transition.

A strong National Service system, with dedicated and committed National Servicemen, both full-time and in the operationally ready service, remains the bedrock of our defence to guarantee the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Singapore.

Sir, let me conclude by thanking all our National Servicemen who have served over the years in the defence of our nation. I would also like to thank the parents, wives, girlfriends, and other family members for the support that they have given to our National Servicemen. Those who have served are the role models for our future National Servicemen. Their dedication and commitment made it possible for Singapore to enjoy the peace and security, which is the foundation for our prosperity and progress, and made us the nation that we are.

Thank you, Sir.

New Release:

- Full-time National Service Duration (Document No:20040615001.pdf)

National Archives of Singapore