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SPEECH BY MR A RAHIM ISHAK, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE
(FOREIGN AFFAIRS) AT A DINNER HELD IN CONJUNCTION
WITH SANA DRUG ABUSE PREVENTION SEMINAR AT THE
MANDARIN HOTEL ON FRIDAY, 30 DECEMBER 1977 AT 7.30 PM

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It has been acknowledged that the problem of drug abuse and addiction in Singapore has reached such proportions which require firm and positive action on our part. The total number of drug addicts by the last quarter of 1977 has come close to 20,000. Although this figure forms a small percentage in relation to our population of 2.6 million, the figure is astounding because of its implications. Drug addiction in Singapore, because it affects our labour force which is mostly under 30, would have its toll bringing with it social and economic damage.

The government has been alert to this social and economic menace and has embarked on various programmes and operations to curtail both the demand and supply aspects of the problem, involving education, legislation enforcement and rehabilitation. It is gratifying to note that voluntary organisations and civic-conscious individuals like parents, teachers and voluntary workers have come forward to augment and complement the government's efforts.

Much has been written and said about the various aspects of the drug problem. Statistics have been compiled. Some research has been made to the causes and competent authorities have mapped out strategies for combating drug abuse. The seminar that you have just attended is one such forum and I am sure it would contribute to the amount of information we have already gathered. However, I would like to take this occasion to touch on one aspect, which you will agree is an important one, of the drug problem and that is recidivism. In fighting the supply of drugs in Singapore, the government faces

immeasurable obstacles in fencing off entry points of the drug traffic. It has been discovered that there could not be a 100 percent blockade because of the side effects to important sectors of our economy, for example, tourism. This makes it all the more important that the demand aspect be tackled with diligence and intensity. I am pleased to note that the second phase of operation Ferret will tackle recidivism.

The Minister for Home Affairs in opening this Seminar the other day revealed that nearly 800 of the 6,350 heroin abusers detected in the first eight months of operation Ferret have absconded. In addition, about 200 ex-drug abusers released from Drug Rehabilitation Centres have left their families and jobs and are believed to have relapsed into their old habit. The problem of relapse must therefore be viewed with all seriousness because it has been discovered that most of these cases occur in the first three months following aftercare. In extreme cases during the first week, and there have been cases of relapse even on the first day after having undergone rehabilitation. The question which arises is whether our rehabilitation methods are inadequate?

The causes of recidivism are many and varied, but the most common ones are social and psychological in nature. After having been released many relapse into drug-taking because they return to the same old circle of friends. The psychological need also drive them to the old habit. It is like going back to something one likes. There is such a yearning for the euphoric state. To illustrate this point, I was for almost three years in Jakarta as Ambassador. During that whole period, I felt that I have missed the great variety of delicious food available in Singapore. After I returned, I visited all my favourite food haunts including hawker stalls and now friends have remarked that I have grown a little rounder. Fortunately I am not addicted to drugs! I was craving only for the food I liked.

How do we tackle the problem of recidivism which is crucial to our battle against drug abuse? I understand that in Japan, where they have been more successful than other countries in facing this problem, they have deployed one member of the civil defence corps to every individual ex-drug abuser. The former acts as a counsellor and

friend to the latter, making sure that he does not relapse and resort to drugs again. Perhaps we could learn from this and employ this method in Singapore making the necessary adjustments to suit local conditions.

The scheme that I have suggested has several advantages. In the first place, there will be minimum expenditure. All we need to do is provide training programmes in rehabilitation and counselling for our men in the Special Constabulary (SC) and Vigilante Corps (VC). I understand that the Special Constabulary has already started an aftercare unit for this purpose. Perhaps this could be further strengthened. Secondly, it would be economical since there is a large pool of manpower, 10,000 in the Special Constabulary and another 45,000 in the VC. They are all disciplined and responsible men, and since they belong to the same age group as most of our drug abusers, they would be in a better position to provide heart-to-heart understanding and effective counselling during the difficult time of rehabilitation and kicking the habit. I understand that 50 percent of our drug abusers have criminal backgrounds. It would, therefore, be useful for them to come in contact with our law enforcement personnel.

The methods used to counsel and rehabilitate should vary from each individual drug abuser. Hard and soft methods should be employed. Hard methods for the hard-core, while some may respond positively to soft talk. Our men in the SC and VC could be assisted by the many voluntary workers. I would like to caution that in fighting recidivism we should employ civil methods. We must not make the drug addicts feel that they are social outcasts. Perhaps some of the 200 who have left their families and jobs are already beginning to have the persecuted complex. Ironically, this problem has been made more acute by the immense amount of publicity given to our anti-drug campaign. We must retain the essential meaning and purpose of rehabilitation and not forget that we do not want to ostracise these youths but to make their return to normal and healthy living that much easier.

I take this opportunity to commend those of you who have participated in this Seminar on drug abuse prevention. I am sure that discussions on the various papers presented have been rewarding and informative and would contribute to the long term objective of wiping out drug addiction in Singapore. I wish to congratulate SANA under the energetic and able stewardship of Mr Bae Lian Peck for his untiring efforts in carrying out the campaign against drug abuse.