

14-1/82/04/04

SPEECH BY MR TEH CHEANG WAN, MINISTER FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT,  
AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF GEYLANG WEST ZONE 'D' RESIDENTS'  
COMMITTEE CENTRE CUM CRIME PREVENTION EXHIBITION AT BLOCK 59  
SIMS DRIVE ON SUNDAY, 4 APRIL 1982 AT 10 AM

It gives me great pleasure to be here this morning for the official opening of the Geylang West Zone 'D' Residents' Committee Centre and Crime Prevention Exhibition.

Today, nearly 70 per cent of the population of Singapore live in HDB estates. Highrise living has become a way of life for the majority of Singaporeans. As land for housing is limited, more and more people will become apartment dwellers in the future. Most HDB residents are happy with the standard of facilities and living environment in their housing estates. They agree that the flats and amenities they now enjoy are a vast improvement over the old shophouses, squatter huts and rural houses which they once occupied. However, many people regret the loss of the neighbourliness and community spirit which characterise kampung life. I agree that this loss is most regrettable. Nothing could be worse than the loneliness and isolation which highrise living can create if the sense of community is not forged anew.

On 1 February, 1982, the "Straits Times" featured an article about a lady who was raped, beaten and murdered in her apartment in London. She was so badly battered that the police were unable to establish whether she was a teenager or a mature woman. It was reported that she had screamed for help for nearly half an hour, but neighbours who heard the shouts did not respond or even call the police. This frightening story is a lesson to all of us. I am certain HDB residents will never permit their estates to degenerate into such inhospitable, fearful places.

The character of a community depends on the qualities of the individuals who make up the community. A community of inconsiderate and selfish people is weak and helpless: its members are easy prey for criminals. On the other hand, a community of concerned individuals who are willing to contribute time and effort for mutual help and

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protection is not easily terrorised by criminal elements.

The sense of community in the old kampungs had been bred over a period of decades. In the rural villages of ancient China and India, the process had taken generations. Unfortunately, in Singapore today, we cannot afford to wait for decades or generations to foster strong communities in our housing estates. To accelerate the process of community development, the government has encouraged the formation of Residents' Committees. One of the first and most important tasks of the Residents' Committees is to get all the residents on the same floor of an apartment block to know one another. By knowing who their neighbours are, residents can immediately identify any stranger in the block. It will be difficult for would-be criminals to make mischief without being noticed.

Residents can contribute further to their own well-being by cultivating the spirit of mutual help. They should not only look after their own property and family, but that of their neighbours as well. "Why help our neighbours?" Some people may ask. Let me attempt to answer the question with an illustration. When I visited Fiji in 1966, I was told that the people living in the smaller islands need not buy fish. Each day the fishing boats go out at sunrise and return at sunset. Those who have caught many fish would share their catch with those who have no luck. When a man failed to catch any fish, somebody who had a good catch would share with him. It dawned on me that this was a marvellous way of ensuring that everybody has fish everyday. By sharing with others, a man had insurance against bad times. Applying the same spirit of mutual help to our HDB estates, residents can be assured that their properties and their families are looked after at all times, and not only when they are at home.

I would like to commend the men and women who serve on the Residents' Committees, CCCs, MCs and other grassroots organisations. These public-spirited individuals give their time voluntarily to the service of the community without expecting any rewards. The more volunteers there are who come forward to serve, the stronger and healthier the community becomes. However, the community's strength does not depend entirely on public-spirited people. Every resident of the community has a role to play in building up the community. I welcome those who wish to

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participate actively in the community to contact me. I shall be more than happy to get them involved. It does not matter if they are not highly qualified or if they do not hold high positions. In community work, qualifications and status are of secondary importance. The most important requirement is that the volunteer is imbued with a genuine desire to serve the community.

Owing to the constraint of limited land area, the only way most Singaporeans can have a comfortable home is in HDB estates. The success of highrise living depends not only on the HDB but on each and every resident. The HDB is the provider of modern amenities and facilities. The residents themselves determine the quality of their living environment. It is within our each to make every HDB estate a safe and secure haven for our children, our elders and ourselves.

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