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Singapore

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SPEECH BY DR YEO NING HONG, MINISTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS AND  
INFORMATION AND SECOND MINISTER FOR DEFENCE, AT THE CEREMONY  
TO COMMEMORATE THE DELIVERY OF THE FIRST MRT TRAINS  
AT BISHAN DEPOT ON TUESDAY, 8 JULY 1986 AT 11.00 AM

This year's theme for our National Day celebration is "Together.....Excellence for Singapore". Our new MRT train is a visual illustration of this theme. The MRT trains when operational will bring Singaporeans closer together. Travelling will be faster, easier, and more convenient, particularly for those in our housing estates. With the trains, we will also take another step upwards in our steady climb towards excellence in our public transport system. The MRT will add another service to the range of options available for congestion-free travel in Singapore - a feature taken for granted by Singaporeans and appreciated most when they are overseas.

The train is the single most important component in the MRT system. For commuters, the train is the MRT. The travails of planning and construction will be forgotten. The intricacies of computer control, power transmission and other behind-the-scene technical complexities are of little interest or concern. These systems are expected to be well looked after, as indeed they will. The trains running along the MRT lines will be another source of pride for Singaporeans, like our port, airport and Benjamin Sheares Bridge. Hence the significance of this morning's official acceptance of the first train.

When construction began less than three years ago, based on the experience of other countries, we expected massive disruption to our population. Our objective was

ambitious - to build as many stations simultaneously as feasible. We wanted to have the MRT available for the public soonest to avoid serious congestion on our roads expected in the 1990's. The MRTC staff and engineers undertook a programme to keep the public informed of the progress of construction work, and to win their support for the project. Community leaders went out of their way to meet with residents and help them understand and overcome the effects of the construction work. The MRTC responded in the same spirit. It made changes wherever possible, to accommodate such feedback from community leaders. Where changes were not possible, engineers provided detailed explanation. Government departments and statutory boards helped wherever possible, e.g. HDB reduced rental rates for shops severely affected by MRT work.

The MRT project is an excellent example of what we as a people can achieve together, working together to help one another. It shows the maturity and understanding of Singaporeans. It shows their ability to accept short-term individual sacrifices for long-term national benefits. All this understanding and mutual cooperation resulted in a much lower level of complaints. So, engineers and supervisors were able to concentrate on resolving technical problems without excessive distraction to attend to the nitty-gritty of complaints.

Let me quote you some figures to illustrate this public support. In 1984, the first year of construction, there were 43 complaints for every million man-hours worked. In 1985 this rate decreased to a low level of 18. For the first five months of 1986, complaints went even lower, to 16 per million man-hours worked. This is particularly gratifying when we note that the number of worksites has increased over the months to more than 40 now.

All these contribute to faster than expected progress in spite of a tight schedule. With a large integrated project like this, any unnecessary delay anywhere will mean billions of dollars of investment idling around, without being put to productive use. Conversely, any advance in the project would benefit us immensely. If the present level of progress by the contractors continues, and if the present level of public cooperation is maintained, I am optimistic that we should be able to have the start-up of the first train service by end 1987, shortly before Christmas. In other words, if all goes well, in less than 18 months from now, the public will be able to enjoy their first ride on the MRT trains. That would be a good way to say "Thank you" to all Singaporeans for their support and understanding.

Before I conclude, let me touch on an area of obvious interest to the public. Numerous people have asked me about it. The subject is fares. I expect fares to be finalised some time in the second half of next year. I announced last month that the MRTTC is looking into the possibility of having a private company operate the trains. The company will take into account the cost of manpower and energy then prevailing. I can give the assurance that the Government will not permit the company to profiteer at the expense of the travelling public. The principle for setting fares is clear. Fares will be kept as low as possible, consistent with collecting enough revenue to maintain the trains and the MRT system in good and safe working conditions, to put aside enough for stock replacements, and to give a reasonable return to the shareholders. Singaporeans with POSB or CPF accounts know that interest is paid on their money deposited in such accounts. It is fair therefore that CPF account holders who invest in the MRT company should also get a reasonable return on their money. One thing is certain. Because the Government will be paying for the

construction of the MRT stations and lines, fares on our MRT will be lower than fares on MRT's in countries where commuters have to repay the capital cost and financing of the construction of their systems.

In conclusion, let me once again congratulate the MRT Corporation and its contractors for having done a good job so far. I want also to thank the public again for their support and co-operation. I hope that the days ahead will see even greater progress towards the smooth completion of Singapore's biggest and most complex construction project.

Let the spirit of togetherness that we have shared in this project carry us through to new levels of excellence in Singapore's public transport system. Let our theme "Together...Excellence for Singapore" be realised.

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