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SPEECH BY PRESIDENT C V DEVAN NAIR AT THE SANA CHARITY
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Drug trafficking and drug addiction provide a worldwide landscape of disaster in which multitudes of unhappy spirits have lost and continue to lose their way. The traffickers in evil make huge fortunes for themselves. Governments are either desperate or helpless. Enforcement agencies are hamstrung by legislators and liberal legislative lobbies who wage militant campaigns to protect the fundamental rights of traffickers, pimps and criminals against encroachment by the law. Few campaign for the rights of the victims of evil doers. Result: despair in Heaven and rejoicing in Hell. The victims multiply, and so do the dens of iniquity and the traffickers in evil.

A headline in the Straits Times of 19 January '85 read: "Drug menace becoming a global threat, says UN body". The report quoted the International Narcotics Control Board's conclusion that drug trafficking had hit record levels in many countries, and narcotics abuse now menaced almost the entire world. The report went on to say that, "in the view of this world body, although governments had launched unparalleled counter-offensives last year, drug trafficking and abuse were now so pervasive that entire economies are disrupted, legal institutions menaced and the very security of some states threatened."

The number of drug-related deaths in Western Europe now reach 1,500 a year, and the situation is rapidly deteriorating. The drug situation in the United States is no better. It remains an increasingly serious public health problem. Where the developing countries are concerned, reliable statistics are more difficult to come by. It would be safe to assume that the situation in much of the Third World is even more horrendous.

Fortunately for Singapore, our legislators have not allowed themselves to be drugged into insensibility by eloquent pleas for clemency for drug traffickers. We recognise the truth in the warning by the well-known Anglo-Indian writer, the late Mr Rudyard Kipling, who had said: "Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind".

Words can inflame public opinion. They can also tranquillise it. I remember reading an essay by Max Lerner, under the title, "The Assault on the Mind". He said: "What is dangerous about the tranquillisers is that whatever peace of mind they bring is a packaged peace of mind. Where you buy a pill and buy peace with it, you get conditioned to spurious solutions instead of deep ones".

We do not use kid gloves when we deal with drug traffickers. That would be a spurious solution. Liberal lobbies and Amnesty International notwithstanding, our judges decree the hangman's noose for persons found guilty of drug trafficking. Our "no nonsense" approach has worked. Drug traffickers do not care to ply their death-dealing trade here.

Over the last eight years, more than 2,000 traffickers were arrested. In the process, drug distribution networks and drug syndicates in the Republic were broken. We have managed to whittle down to manageable proportions the drug abuse problem. There was an

estimated 13,000 drug addicts in 1977. By 1984, this number had been reduced to 6,000. This was achieved through coordinated efforts by Government and non-Governmental organisations in an over-all strategy against narcotics abuse.

We have also been quite successful in our treatment and rehabilitation of drug addicts. In a survey of 4,967 ex-drug addicts taken on 1 October '83, five years after their discharge from drug rehabilitation centres, it was found that, 2,817 or 56.7 per cent had successfully stayed away from drug during the five-year period. Although the relapse rate of 43 per cent appears to be high, it is creditable compared to efforts in other parts of the world.

Physical dependence on drugs can be eliminated fairly easily with confinement in a drug-free environment within the rehabilitation centre. The same cannot be said of psychological dependence.

When drug addicts are discharged from the rehabilitation centres and placed on supervision, it is invariably the psychological dependence that pulls them back to drugs. Tremendous will power is required to resist this pull. Regrettably, most of the addicts lack the necessary will power. Every effort must therefore be made to help them overcome their craving.

Although reduced and contained, our drug abuse problem is by no means eradicated. There is, first, the problem of hard-core addicts. This group, whose number is increasing, has not responded to the present treatment and rehabilitation programme. They have repeatedly relapsed into drug-taking. At the end of 1984, there were 680 hard-core addicts who were undergoing treatment and rehabilitation for the fourth time. If a solution is not

found, the number of hard-core addicts will increase. So long as there exists a pool of addicts who have not been cured of their addiction, there is every danger of a resurgence of the drug problem.

The hard-core addicts need more individual care. Our volunteer aftercare officers could provide them with more intensive counselling, and spend more time to help them avoid the pitfalls of craving.

The second problem is that of inhalant abuse, otherwise known as glue sniffing. Inhalants are a group of chemicals that produce psychoactive (mind-altering) vapours. They are extensively used in common commercial and household products such as glues, thinners, light fluid, nail varnish remover, or as fuel for motor vehicles. Like some drugs, such as sleeping pills, they can be dangerous if not properly used.

Glue sniffing was first detected in 1979. Since then, the number of cases detected has increased sharply. Long term abuse of these chemicals can lead to damage of body organs such as the lungs, liver, kidney and the brain. In severe cases, it can lead to irregular heart-beats and eventually, death. In this sense, glue sniffing is as dangerous as heroin addiction, if not more so.

What is alarming is that the majority of glue sniffers are youngsters, some of them below ten years of age. Several school pupils were detected to have abused these substances. Many of these young persons, and their parents as well, are ignorant of the dangerous effects of these substances. SANA has been entrusted with the important task of informing and arousing public opinion on the dangers of glue sniffing. A three-month long national campaign on anti-inhalant abuse will begin in March this year.

SANA has played a vitally important and active role in Singapore's efforts to contain problems associated with narcotics abuse. Its voluntary aftercare officers have done much to befriend the less fortunate members of our society. They provide counselling and help the addicts re-adjust to normal life. I hope that more people will come forward to join this corps of dedicated volunteers. Those of us who do not have the time to volunteer our services as aftercare officers, could do our part by contributing financially towards the nation-wide effort required to control the drug problem.

I urge all members of the public to help SANA in its fund-raising endeavours.

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