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**SPEECH BY PRESIDENT ONG TENG CHEONG  
AT THE STATE BANQUET HOSTED IN HONOUR OF  
HIS EXCELLENCY MR NELSON MANDELA,  
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA  
AT RAFFLES HOTEL ON 5 MARCH 1997**

On behalf of the Government and people of Singapore, it gives me great pleasure to welcome you and the members of your delegation. We are honoured by this State visit, the first by a South African President. Your visit follows close upon my Prime Minister's first official visit to South Africa. It is a clear signal that relations between our two countries are getting closer.

When you welcomed my Prime Minister in Cape Town last week, you mentioned that you were struck by both the differences and similarities between our two countries. Allow me to mention some additional similarities. We are both multi-racial countries. In the short period you have been President of South Africa, you have made tremendous progress in your non-racial and "rainbow nation" concept for the new South Africa. You have united the people of South Africa. Since Singapore's independence in 1965, we have also faced a similar challenge. Each of our ethnic groups has distinct strengths that can be tapped for the progress of the society. Our experience is that this is best done within the context of a meritocratic society where every citizen, regardless of race, has an equal opportunity to succeed.

Every society has an obligation to ensure that each and every child has an equal opportunity to develop to his full potential. This is a heavy responsibility. We welcome visits to Singapore by South Africans to see the results of our experience. We are also happy to share with South Africa our experience in the development of human resources under our technical assistance programmes.

Another similarity is our common desire to develop a sense of community among members of our regions. In Southeast Asia, we are fortunate that ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) has become a model of regional cooperation. This year, we will celebrate our 30th Anniversary. In South Africa, you have taken the lead, in your capacity as Chairman of the Southern African Development Community, to strengthen regional cooperation. I am confident that both our regions can also cooperate well together.

South Africa also faces some unique challenges as it makes the transition into the post-apartheid era. You have bravely taken on these challenges. Already in place are measures to create prospects for a better life for all in South Africa. Your national housing policy, non-racial education system and universal access to health facilities are but a few of these measures. You have also set in place institutions to lay the foundation for a democracy based on universal principles of justice and equality for all. Your new Constitution is a source of inspiration. Your initial successes in such a short time have impressed many, including Singaporeans.

My Prime Minister's visit to South Africa, and your visit to Singapore, will help both our countries to understand better how we can cooperate for mutual benefit. South Africa is already our largest economic partner on the African continent. Our businessmen have invested in your country in diverse

areas such as textiles, telecommunications and tourism. More Singaporeans are becoming aware of the opportunities available in the southern African region.

Southern Africa could become the next growth area. South Africa with its good infrastructure and regional experience could become Singapore's gateway to your region. For this reason, my Prime Minister has led a business delegation on a visit to southern Africa. I understand that members of the business delegation have already started working on potential joint-ventures. Similarly, the presence of a South African business delegation here in Your Excellency's delegation will help in the establishment of mutually beneficial trade and economic links between our two countries and regions.

South Africa has a geographically strategic location. Situated midway between the dynamic East Asian region and the promising South American common market, South Africa has a potentially new economic role to play. South Africa has the potential to become a trade and tourism hub between these two regions of economic growth. Singapore is prepared to work with South Africa to develop this potential to the mutual benefit of both countries and regions.

I am delighted that you have been able to accept my invitation to visit Singapore. Your conviction of the need to rid South Africa of the apartheid policy, and your courage and determination in realising it, is an inspiration to all.

Ladies and Gentlemen, may I invite you to rise as I propose a toast to the good health and success of His Excellency, President Nelson Mandela; to peace and prosperity for the people of South Africa; and to our continued friendship.

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