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**SPEECH BY PROFESSOR S. JAYAKUMAR,
MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND LAW,
AT THE LAUNCHING OF RSS UNITY AND RSS SOVEREIGNTY
AT SINGAPORE TECHNOLOGIES SHIPBUILDING AND
ENGINEERING LIMITED
ON SATURDAY, 19 JULY 1997 AT 10.00 AM**

The launching of the Republic of Singapore Navy's patrol vessels, **RSS UNITY** and **RSS SOVEREIGNTY**, today signifies Singapore's commitment to developing a sound maritime defence capability to protect Singapore's maritime interests and to safeguard the sea lanes around Singapore.

Singapore, as an island nation, relies on the unimpeded use of the sea to conduct its external trade with the global community. Freedom of navigation through the Malacca and Singapore Straits as well as the South China Sea is fundamental to the continued survival and prosperity of Singapore. The Port of Singapore today is a megahub for seaborne trade. More than 330 shipping lines operate services through Singapore to 610 ports in 130 countries. At any time there are about 800 ships in port. Ships registered under the Singapore flag form the tenth largest fleet in the world. Singapore is the busiest port in the world in terms of shipping tonnage. The Port itself contributes to five per cent of our Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

The Malacca and Singapore Straits and South China Sea have been major international highways for seaborne trade for many centuries. Freedom of navigation through these sea lanes is not only critical to the prosperity of Singapore, but also to all the littoral states in the region and those countries whose trade and ships traverse these waters.

Any threat to the freedom and safety of navigation through these waters would therefore have adverse consequences beyond the region and affect the entire international community. For example, the dispute over the Spratlys would severely affect freedom of navigation and this dispute is therefore not just a question of sovereignty over these islands.

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea provides the regime under which both maritime nations and littoral states can benefit from the use of the sea. It came into force on 16th November 1995 and is an important development providing the framework for safeguarding the freedom of navigation whilst addressing the concerns of littoral states. Singapore has always been a firm supporter of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and, as a State Party to the Convention, we will cooperate with all like-minded countries in facilitating its successful implementation.

The Singapore maritime authorities and the Navy also participate in international and regional initiatives to make the seas even safer for all users. These include joint hydrographic surveys, Joint Co-ordinated Patrols against sea robberies as well as bilateral and multilateral Search and Rescue co-operation. Singapore has also implemented a Vessel Traffic Information System to improve the safety of navigation in the Singapore Straits.

Given the important role of the Republic of Singapore Navy in ensuring our continued access to and safe use of international sea lanes, it is important that the Navy continues to maintain effective capabilities to do so. The two patrol vessels launched today are the eighth and ninth of twelve such ships which have been designed and built by MINDEF's Defence Technology Group, Singapore Technologies and the Navy for the unique requirements of operating in the waters around Singapore. These ships incorporate water jet propulsion and technologically excellent combat systems which will allow the navy to provide effective coastal surveillance and defence capabilities. Efficient yet effective manning is derived through extensive automation which includes electronic chart systems, integrated shipboard communications systems and command and control systems.

RSS Unity and RSS Sovereignty must be manned by well trained, committed and competent Singaporeans. I am confident that the Navy will ensure that these vessels and their crews will at all times be effective instruments of deterrence, defence and diplomacy.

I congratulate MINDEF's Defence Technology Group, Singapore Technologies and the Navy on the launching of RSS UNITY and RSS SOVEREIGNTY.

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