

PRESS RELEASE

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**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY MR ABDULLAH TARMUGI,
MINISTER FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
AND MINISTER-IN-CHARGE OF MUSLIM AFFAIRS,
AT THE MENDAKI '97 SEMINAR
AT MARINA MANDARIN BALLROOM
ON SATURDAY, 27 SEPTEMBER 1997 AT 9.00 AM**

It gives me great pleasure to be here with you this morning, to be among community leaders and activists at this MENDAKI '97 Seminar.

This is only the third time that a gathering of grassroots leaders in the Malay-Muslim community is held by MENDAKI. The first was in 1982 even before I joined politics. That led to the formation of MENDAKI. The second occasion was in 1989 when mandate was given to MENDAKI to widen its scope and adopt a more total approach to the development of our community.

This is the 15th year of MENDAKI's existence and in less than 30 months' time, we will begin a new century. It is therefore an opportune time for us to meet again to discuss what needs to be done to prepare ourselves for the coming century.

When I look at the list of participants, the speakers and the chair and resource persons, I see a healthy mix of young and old; newcomers and

veterans. I am glad that the veterans and founder members feel that they are still part of MENDAKI by being present at this event. They were there when MENDAKI was founded. It was their vision, their sweat and sacrifices that helped make what MENDAKI is today. We must acknowledge their valuable contributions. We need their wisdom and their assistance to link us with our past to add a deeper perspective to our present and our future.

The younger generation too are not without their contributions. We need their energy, their idealism and enthusiasm. Unburdened by any baggage from the past, they can inject new ideas and fresh viewpoints to our concern and problems. They are our future leaders and movers, our future hopes. They will, after all, have to lead their own generation.

It is true that old social problems and weakness still plague the community and that we are far from being the successful and respected community that we want to be. But it would be a gross injustice to the community to deny the achievements it has made out of its own efforts.

We have gained some ground in the last decade. This has given the community some confidence in its ability to break the myths and stereotypes that have held the community down. What we must do now is to build on the momentum that has started and redouble our efforts so that our progress can be accelerated and we gather even more momentum to go forward.

If MENDAKI is to continue to play a role in accelerating the community's progress, it must ensure that the people running it must prepare for leadership renewal and change. MENDAKI and its IMs must identify, attract, nurture and groom capable and committed men and women to leadership positions.

This means we will have to build a bigger pool of activists, movers and potential leaders in the community. This has to start with encouraging wider participation in community work specifically in the activities and programmes of MENDAKI and the other Malay-Muslim organisations.

As leaders of our respective organisations, we must always remember that we will not be around forever. Leaders come and go but the community's struggle to uplift itself, to be as competitive and progressive as the other communities here is an increasing and continuous one.

I believe there are individuals in the community who are capable and unattached to any organisation who can contribute to MENDAKI's efforts at uplifting the community. I leave it to this seminar to find ways to attract and enthuse them to come forward to contribute their energy and ideas for the betterment of the community.

I had met heads of MENDAKI's IMs to sound them out on the need for MENDAKI to rejuvenate itself by involving individual talent - much like what our country is now doing to attract foreign talent - to ensure that MENDAKI remains contemporary, relevant and ready to prepare the community for the coming century. My purpose was to assure them that while the move was to induct and involve more individual talent into MENDAKI's activities and decision-making process, it was not intended to erode the role and position of the IMs in MENDAKI.

I wish to reiterate that assurance. MENDAKI would not be where it is now without the support and involvement of the IMs. MENDAKI will continue to depend on that support and involvement to ensure that it remains as a community-based organisation. At the same time, we should not deny

ourselves and the community further inputs from individuals who may want to serve but do not belong to any of the IMs. We must find a way to include such individuals so that they can complement and add more value to our efforts.

Let me now address the question of Information Technology (IT). You would have heard by now of how IT will play a crucial role in our lives and that unless we master IT, we will be at a serious disadvantage in future.

MENDAKI's proposal for a community intranet is not because it is fashionable to dabble in IT. Rather, it is to assist IMs in their work, to network and communicate with one another and with the community more efficiently and speedily. But more importantly, it is to familiarise ourselves with IT so that an IT culture could develop in the community thus making us better prepared to face the new century.

Let me make a final point before I conclude, and that is the importance for MENDAKI to work with other community and national organisations. In recent years, MENDAKI has forged mutually beneficial links with the other ethnic self-help groups: Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC), Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA) and the Eurasian Association. We share our experiences and collaborate on joint projects. We should step up such collaborations. Likewise, MENDAKI should explore ways it can work with the Community Development Councils (CDCs) and other bodies where there is mutual benefit to be enjoyed.

We cannot isolate ourselves from the rest of society. Neither should we spend time to reinvent the wheel when there are already bodies or institutions which have already refined the art of wheel-making. We should

tap resources available in our society where they can help us in our mission. And where we can, we should also share our experiences and assist others in their tasks where they do not conflict with ours. This way, MENDAKI not only increases its effectiveness but also becomes a contributing institution in this multi-racial, multi-religious society of ours. I hope our IMs understand the need for us to do this.

Let me conclude by thanking those involved in organising this seminar. I hope all of you will participate actively in the discussions and that a consensus will be reached at the end of the day. I wish the Seminar every success and I hope you have a pleasant and fruitful meeting.

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