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Subject: Speech by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in Durban, South Africa, 12
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Singapore Government

PRESS RELEASE

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SPEECH BY SINGAPORE PRIME MINISTER GOH CHOK TONG AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF
THE COMMONWEALTH HEADS OF GOVERNMENT MEETING IN DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA ON FRIDAY, 12
NOVEMBER 1999

Your Majesty

Your Royal Highnesses

Your Excellency, President Thabo Mbeki

My Distinguished Colleagues

Ladies and Gentlemen

On behalf of my fellow Commonwealth colleagues, let me say how
delighted we are to be in South Africa to attend CHOGM in this beautiful city of
Durban. I am told that George where the Retreat will be held is another outstanding
venue, with excellent facilities for us to have an informal discussion. We thank
you, President Mbeki, and your government for the warm hospitality and the excellent
arrangements made for the Conference.

2 I would also like to extend my warm wishes to Nigeria on its return
to the Commonwealth. I am sure I am voicing the sentiments of all my colleagues

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when I say that we are delighted that President Obasanjo is able to join us here today. We also welcome our friends from Nauru, who are attending the CHOGM for the first time.

3 It is appropriate that the 50th Anniversary of the Commonwealth and the last CHOGM of this millennium is being held here in South Africa. As the Secretary-General, Chief Emeka Anyaoku has pointed out in his 1999 report on the Commonwealth, no country has done more to "shape the modern Commonwealth" than South Africa. The Commonwealth played a role in exerting pressure to end apartheid. In 1994, the Commonwealth was therefore extremely delighted to see its efforts come to fruition with the first democratic elections in your country. Your Excellency's election this year represents another important phase in political transition in democratic South Africa. South Africa is a success story. Its emergence as a strong and vibrant nation can help play an important role in re-shaping the Commonwealth in the 21st century.

4 South Africa is today a shining example of how democratic rule and racial harmony can be achieved in a pluralistic society. In this regard, special mention must be made of former President Mandela. His vision, wisdom and pragmatic efforts at reconciliation have transformed the once divided nation into the "Rainbow Nation" that it is today. South Africa has through Mr Mandela's efforts attained its rightful place as an important member of the Commonwealth and the larger international community.

5 Mr President, your country's important leadership role in the international community is clearly demonstrated by your successful chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the South African Development Community (SADC) and your presidency of UNCTAD IX over the last five years.

6 I personally had the pleasure of meeting President Mbeki when I visited South Africa in 1997. He was then Vice-President. The discussions I had with him left a deep impression on me. President Mbeki is a knowledgeable and tested leader. He is a doer and a pragmatist. He is eminently qualified to lead us to a successful conclusion of our deliberations in the days ahead.

7 It would be remiss on my part if I do not take this opportunity to say a few words of thanks to our dear friend Chief Emeka Anyaoku, for the substantial contribution, wisdom and leadership that he has provided to the Commonwealth over the last 10 years. His warm and familiar presence will be missed after this CHOGM. I hope we will continue to see a lot of you, Chief Anyaoku, even after you have stepped down as Secretary-General of the Commonwealth.

8 I commend the choice of this year's CHOGM special theme of "People-Centred Development: The Challenge of Globalisation". The topic is timely. Globalisation is inevitable. It is here to stay. We therefore need to plug ourselves into the system, and harness its potential. As the theme itself implicitly suggests, what good is globalisation if it is not centred on the improvement of the well being of our citizens? It is therefore important for us to look at how we in the Commonwealth can work together, and help our people, especially those less equipped to meet the challenges of change, adjust, adapt and harness the potential of globalisation.

9 Other important items on our agenda are the future of Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) and how our organisation responds to the situation in Pakistan. These subjects require careful thought and consideration. We must balance the importance of upholding the Harare Declaration with the need to maintain objectivity and cohesion of the Commonwealth.

10 The Commonwealth is unique amongst international groupings. Its strength lies in its diversity; its members come from every continent and all stages of development. This diversity gives it an unrivalled ability to help build consensus on international issues. It also provides a valuable opportunity for leaders to meet every two years in an informal environment to engage in a frank discussion on issues that affect our lives. In the past decade, the Commonwealth has successfully transformed itself into an organisation whose members share certain core values including democracy, the rule of law and good governance.

11 The world is changing fast. Since we last met in Edinburgh, the international community has been confronted with major political and economic challenges. Whether the Commonwealth can remain useful and relevant will depend on the ability of our organisation, as well as the ability of our individual governments, to anticipate and respond to these changes.

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12 The challenges facing us are not to be underestimated. Under the able chairmanship of President Mbeki, I have no doubts that we will have a productive meeting and that we will leave South Africa with renewed confidence and commitment to the Commonwealth.

Thank you.

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