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Subject: (EMBARGOED) Speech by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, 21 Nov 99, 12pm

Singapore Government

PRESS RELEASE

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SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER GOH CHOK TONG AT THE LAUNCH OF THE SENIOR CITIZENS' WEEK ON
SUNDAY, 21 NOVEMBER 1999, AT THE MARINA PROMENADE AT 12.00 PM

In October last year, I set up the Inter-Ministerial Committee on the Ageing Population, or in short, the IMC. Singapore was then in the midst of the regional economic crisis. Our economy was in recession and the Government had to tackle the immediate problems. But we did not lose sight of longer-term issues. We did a fundamental review of Singapore's long-term economic competitiveness and came up with a strategic plan to sustain Singapore's prosperity. We also paid attention to critical social issues, one of which is our rapidly ageing population.

members include the Minister for Health, the Minister for Community Development, 6 MPs, 1 NMP, and many representatives from the people and public sectors. It is a broad-based committee.

Understanding the causes of ageing

3 You can see for yourself that our population is ageing. Just look around you the next time you travel in the MRT train or watch football at the National Stadium or shop in the supermarket. You will notice that there are many older people, certainly more older people now than say 15 to 20 years ago. And there will be even more older people in future. Today, one in fourteen Singaporeans are above 65 years old. In just 30 years' time, one in five Singaporeans will be above 65 years old. This means that the number of older people will be three times that of today. Our population is ageing at a rate that is among the highest in the world.

4 There are three main reasons why the proportion of older persons in our society is increasing so fast. First, due to the post-war baby boom, we now have a bulge in our population structure in the 35 to 54 years age groups. By 2030, this group will be among those aged 65 years and over.

5 Second, Singaporeans are living longer than before. A baby born in 1947 was expected to live for about 50 years. Today, life expectancy is 75 years for men and 80 years for women. And it will rise further because of significant improvements in healthcare and medical technology.

6 Third, our birth rates are declining. A population needs a Total Fertility Rate (TFR) of about 2.1 to replace itself, ie 2.1 children per woman. Our TFR is only 1.5. This is way below replacement rate. Many of our people are not marrying. Many are marrying late and having fewer or no children. Fewer births per year means a bigger proportion of older people.

7 The demographic change is a challenge to every one of us. The greying of the population cannot be stopped. Fortunately, the pace of acceleration will only pick up in about 10 to 15 years' time. This gives us some time to plan ahead and minimise its impact.

8 Making provisions for the needs of the old in advance will spare the future generations a heavy burden later on. Planning ahead is like a growing tree. If its roots can reach far and deep for water and nutrients, it will grow tall and strong. It will provide shade and bear fruits for others to enjoy years later.

Helping to realise Singapore 21

9 Senior citizens should be socialised as an integral part of the

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mainstream of Singapore society and be allowed to contribute as useful members of the family and community. They should age with good health, security and dignity. They can play the role of a transmitter of values, experience and national identity. They can help the young grow emotional roots in Singapore. On emotional bonds to Singapore, a recent media survey found that while 88% of older Singaporeans think that Singapore is a good place to grow old in, only 58% of younger Singaporeans think so. Some young people think the grass is greener on the other side of the fence. But older Singaporeans are wiser – they know that the grass is in fact greener here and Singapore remains the best home to grow old in.

10 The good news is that our senior citizens of the future will be better educated. If we start early and encourage them to embark on new economically productive activities and volunteerism after formal retirement from the work force, their contribution to Singapore's well-being will continue even at a ripe old age.

11 By addressing early the problems associated with an ageing population, we are helping to also realise the ideals of the Singapore 21 vision. In other words, every Singaporean matters and there should be opportunities for all. Active senior citizens help families to grow strongly and strengthen the Singapore heartbeat.

Moving the IMC report forward

12 The IMC took a holistic and integrated approach in dealing with the ageing problem. All aspects are addressed: the "software", i.e. programmes and services for our senior citizens; the "hardware", meaning the infrastructure and environment for the elderly; and the "heartware" or the attitudes, values, mindsets and relationships that underpin our society.

13 After 12 months of hard work, the IMC has completed its study. I understand that about 1000 people from various sectors of our society were consulted directly. Many others were consulted indirectly. They have helped to forge a consensus on how we can, together, realise the vision set by the IMC, that is "Successful Ageing for Singapore". I would like to say a big "thank you" to all of them.

14 The IMC report has proposed many practical policy directions in key areas like financial security, employment, social integration, healthcare, housing and social cohesion. I have asked the relevant Ministries to follow up on the IMC's recommendations and to study how they can be implemented in a coordinated and sustainable manner. Many of the recommendations have significant long-term budgetary impact. The IMC would need to work with the implementing agencies and the Ministry of Finance to prioritise the recommendations based on their cost-effectiveness and financial sustainability.

15 It will require a coordinated national effort to implement the recommendations of the IMC. I have asked the IMC, supported by Ministry of Community Development as the secretariat and lead agency on ageing issues, to continue to oversee the implementation of the recommendations.

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Adding life to years!

16 This year's Senior Citizens Week has adopted the theme of "You are only as old as you feel". The organisers have planned the Week's events as part of the continuing effort to drive home the importance of active and gracious ageing and the challenges facing us in preparing for a greying population. I hope all our young and senior citizens will participate eagerly in the events to enrich their respective experiences. We must not only add years to life, but also add life to years!

17 I am now pleased to officially launch Senior Citizens Week 1999. Enjoy yourself!

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