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Subject: (EMBARGOED) Speech by Mr Sidek Saniff, 6 Jun 2000, 8.30am

Singapore Government

MEDIA RELEASE

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SPEECH BY MR SIDEK SANIFF, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, AT THE OPENING OF THE SINGAPORE YOUTH CONFERENCE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT HELD ON TUES, 6 JUN 2000 AT 8.30 AM IN ENVIRONMENT THEATRETTE

Young friends of the Youth Environmental Network,
Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

1 Thank you for the kind invitation to officiate at the opening of this year's Singapore Youth Conference for the Environment. I am indeed honoured to have the opportunity to grace this annual event organised by the youth environmental network. I am sure their efforts over the years have helped to raise the awareness of our youths with respect to environmental issues and have provoked many to be more concerned about the environment that we so often take for granted.

2 In the last few decades, we have seen many rapid advancements in technology, fuelled by the growing wealth of knowledge obtained through scientific discovery and exploration. The application of technology has certainly helped to improve our way of life, by making things faster, more reliable, more convenient, more efficient and more comfortable. In fact, much of the comforts of life that we enjoy today would not be possible without the innovative

technological advances of the last century. Imagine life without the car, the airplane, telephone, air-conditioning, computers or household appliances such as the vacuum cleaner, refrigerator, washing machine, microwave oven or even the toaster.

3 Two notable advancements in the last few years will have a profound influence on the way the world works and how we live. The first is the Internet, facilitated by advances in information and communications technology, such as laser and fiber optics, broadband access and digitised media. Whereas the inventions of the last century had helped to move goods and people physically from place to place, this new wave will help to connect people and deliver goods and services without them having to move in the first place, by means such as wireless communication, teleconferencing, webcasting and the like.

4 The other notable advancement is the progressive unravelling of the human genome, which will set the stage for a new era in health and medical technology. As it is, scientists are already utilising our knowledge of genetic engineering to produce genetically-modified crops that are more disease-resistant and give higher yield. There have also been inroads into tissue engineering and the much-debated cloning of live animals. With the human source code in hand, the road ahead will be tough and full of ethical pitfalls as we grapple with how this new found knowledge can be made use of in a beneficial and socially-acceptable manner.

5 Keeping in pace with technological advancements has been the growing voice of restraint sounded by environmentalists and other groups. Technological advances have not only shaped the way we work, they have also inadvertently changed the face of the earth. Industries set up to satisfy the market demand for these technological gadgets have fuelled the growing appetite for energy, leading to the rapid depletion of our fossil fuel reserves. The faster rate of obsolescence brought about by technological change has resulted in growing wastage of raw materials and resources. Certain extremists who view all forms of technological advancements as a threat to the well-being of the earth have thus cried out against development and hankered instead for a 'simple' way of life.

6 All these debates about technology versus the environment have only served to bring the issue to the fore. Are we to forego development and live the way our forefathers did in the wild? Or should we reap the maximum

benefit from this world with whatever means and enjoy life while we can? I think you will all agree with me that the wise man will take neither approach.

7 It is timely therefore that the Youth Environmental Network has chosen "The Effects of Technology on the Environment" as the theme for the Singapore Youth Conference for the Environment 2000. As we launch into the new millennium, it is worthwhile to take stock of how technology has helped make this world a better place, and what we, especially youths, can do to ensure that future technological advancements will continue to be based on the principles of sustainable development.

8 As the potential future leaders of this world, be it in politics, business or society, youths today hold the keys to the happiness and well-being of this and future generations. How young people like you perceive technology and its impacts on the environment today will thus have far reaching consequences. Whilst our living environment is resilient to a certain extent, we must be conscious of how we utilise its resources to ensure that technological benefits will continue to be available to our future generations, instead of resulting in a technological melt-down and a forced reversion to primeval ways. At the same time, there must be realism in dealing with technological changes. As a nation, we would not have progressed to where we are today if we had shrunk back and shut ourselves from the so-called "ill winds of development", as some countries have done to their detriment.

9 The challenge before you is therefore to see how we can best harness the power of technology, without getting the short end of the stick in the long run. I understand that there will be a brainstorming session later today as part of the conference and hope you will all have a fruitful time bouncing ideas off one another.

10 I would like to commend the Youth Environmental Network for their enthusiasm and efforts in organising this annual event. I am pleased that young people like them have taken an active interest in promoting environmental awareness and have persevered in doing so for several years. I hope they will continue with such efforts in years to come.

11 I would also like commend the students of Catholic Junior College for putting up the Eco-Quiz as part of this conference. It is certainly a fun-filled and creative way to bring home the environmental message to both participants and spectators.

12 Last but not least, I would like to thank the staff from the Environmental Technological Institute for facilitating the event. Before I end off, I wish to leave you with this meaningful Indian proverb:

“Only after the last tree is cut down,
only after the last water has been contaminated,
only after the last fish has been caught,
only after the last animals have been poisoned,
... only then will you realise that you can't eat money.”

13 I hope this gives us some food for thought. With that, it is now my pleasure to declare the Singapore Youth Conference for the Environment open.

14 Thank you.

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