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Subject: [Embargoed] Speech by Radm Teo Chee Hean, 25 Jun 2000, 9.00am - English Speech

Singapore Government

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**SPEECH BY RADM TEO CHEE HEAN, MINISTER FOR EDUCATION
& SECOND MINISTER FOR DEFENCE AT MUIS MOSQUE SEMINAR
2000 ON SUNDAY 25 JUNE 2000 AT 9 AM AT SHANGRI-LA HOTEL**

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Hj Maarof Salleh, President Muis
Syed Isa Mohd Semait, Mufti Negara
Members of Muis Council
Guests from the Mabims (Malaysia, Negara Brunei Darussalam and
Indonesia)
Mosque management leaders
Ladies and gentlemen

A very good morning to you

We live in a multi-racial and multi-religious nation. Harmony and cohesion among our people is the foundation upon which our national life is built. By working together we can face new challenges and make full use of new opportunities to build a better life for all our people.

Globalisation and the revolution in Information Technology are transforming our world. Every country has to adapt to these new challenges. As Singaporeans we should welcome them. Singapore has always been open to the world. Our education system is preparing our children well for the future. Our people are fortunate, as they are among the best prepared in the world to grasp the new opportunities offered by globalisation and the information revolution.

These changes will bring both positive and negative influences. Community leaders have to understand how to reap the benefits by making the best use of the positive aspects, while minimising the negative consequences.

Information technology allows us to reach out to other countries and communities, but it also allows individuals and communities to withdraw into themselves. IT allows us to build powerful learning networks with educational institutions and great teachers from around the world, opening up new learning opportunities.

But IT also allows us to shut out the rest of the world, so that we live in a virtual world of our own. We may reach out across cyberspace to find common cause with others across the oceans. But we may forget to

stretch out the hand of friendship, or offer a smile to a neighbour just a few doors away. We must learn to live in the virtual world of cyberspace. But we must not forget that real life takes place in the real world in our community around us.

Globalisation means that we must be open to the world and to new ideas. We must understand other cultures and the changes that developments in science and technology will bring.

But every society, every community also wants to preserve its own values, traditions and culture. Each of us wants a moral compass so that we will not lose our way in this bewildering and fast changing world.

That is why our schools emphasise the importance of mother tongue and moral education. These will help our children maintain their culture, heritage and values. In January this year, I had announced that we will strengthen this further. More students can now qualify to study Higher Mother Tongue in secondary schools. And for the Malay community, three new programmes are being introduced. From next year, Bukit Panjang Government High and Tampines Junior College will be starting special Malay elective programmes to encourage able students to pursue their interest in Malay language, literature and culture at Secondary School and Junior College. For those who wish to go further the National Institute of Education will start offering an Honours degree programme in Malay Language and Literature.

I also understand and support the desire of the Muslim community to

nurture its own religious teachers. At present about 400 children, or 4% of Primary 1 Muslim students enrol full time into year 1 in the madrasahs each year. When compulsory education is implemented, the madrasahs can continue to enrol up to this same number of full-time students at year 1. These students will be exempted from attending national schools. From among them, the madrasahs can continue to prepare the future religious teachers for the Muslim community.

To enable their students to qualify for exemption, these madrasahs need to meet certain standards for English, Mathematics and Science at the Primary School Leaving Examination. These standards, which should be set at a reasonable level are currently being discussed by Dr Aline Wong's committee, MUIS and community groups.

All students in Singapore including those who will become future religious leaders need a basic core of knowledge to prepare them for life in the future knowledge based society. All students will also need to develop certain shared aspirations to strengthen our social cohesion and harmony even further in the future Singapore.

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These challenges are not unique to Singapore. People living in every country and of every religion in the world are facing them.

The open, forward looking, multi-racial and multi-religious environment in Singapore is a big advantage. Our people, especially young Singaporeans are used to living in a modern, multi-cultural and fast changing world. Our community leaders and religious leaders have a special role to play to help Singaporeans find the right balance for living

in modern Singapore, and in the modern world.

Religious groups, together with non-religious establishments, can explore new areas for dialogue and cooperation. Some mosques are already organising joint activities with non-Muslim organisations. Such activities help foster understanding among our different ethnic and religious groups. By sharing experiences and perspectives, they can help all communities in Singapore to progress together.

The mosques in Singapore, led by MUIS, are good examples that religious institutions can change with the times. Over the past 30 years, the mosques have successfully transformed themselves into agents of social change, promoting much goodwill and social activities for both Muslims and non-Muslims. Since 1991, eight new mosques with modern design and facilities have been built. Our mosques provide spiritual solace, but they also provide a myriad of social activities such as pre-schools, computer clubs, counseling, family and parenting courses, and youth development programmes.

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One interesting example is the programme that Al-Khair Mosque has embarked on with Choa Chu Kang Secondary School. Non-Muslim students from the school can now have a better understanding about Islam and, in the process, get along even better with their fellow Muslim students.

The Singapore mosque experience clearly shows that religious institutions can contribute substantially to nation building.

I am pleased to note that many mosques are pro-active in organising programmes for community development. For example, they have worked with the Ministry of Health to encourage a healthy life style, organise health screening, and exhibitions on the dangers of smoking. Many mosques have given their support in organising kidney failure and donation pledge exhibitions.

The mosques should study how they can work even more closely with other government agencies, especially the People's Association to make best use of their resources and reach out to more members of the community.

In today's seminar, you will be discussing how to institutionalise best practices in mosques so that these institutions can become model centres of service to the community. I wish you a fruitful discussion. May you continue to lead the mosques as centres of excellence into the future.

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Thank you.
