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Speech by Dr Tony Tan Keng Yam, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, at the Opening of the H.E.R.O.E.S in Total Defence Exhibition

13 Feb 1998

Good Evening Ladies and Gentlemen

When the concept of Total Defence was launched 14 years ago, the Cold War was raging and Communism was a force to be reckoned with. Today, the Cold War is over, but the challenges to the prosperity and security of our region are no less daunting.

Southeast Asia is in the midst of a severe economic downturn. In some ways, this is the gravest crisis and biggest test facing the region since World War. The roots of the financial turmoil are well known. A slowdown in export growth in several Southeast Asian economies in 1997 triggered fears that debt payments could not be met and sparked off a run on regional currencies.

Initially confined to a handful of countries in Southeast Asia, the crisis spread rapidly. The scale of this financial crisis was unexpected and is unprecedented in recent times. There is now a climate of gloom and uncertainty in East Asia. Many of the regional economies are expected to go into recession. Millions of jobs are expected to be lost as the countries go through a painful period of restructuring and belt-tightening.

Singapore has not escaped the fallout from the crisis. As a hub with substantial trade, transportation and production linkages to the region, it is inevitable that our economic growth will be affected to some extent. As a result, government revenues this year are expected to grow more slowly than in previous years and the budget surplus will be smaller. We have to be prepared for rough economic weather and tough times ahead.

Nonetheless, our economy has not been as badly hit as some others. That we have managed

to be relatively unscathed can be attributed to Singapore's sound macroeconomic fundamentals. In good times, we had worked hard to build a strong foundation for our economy that will be resilient to hard knocks.

We have built up economic resilience through prudent fiscal policies and investing in key areas, such as education and training, defence, and economic and infrastructure development, that are necessary for the long term progress and stability of Singapore. Today, our economic base is well diversified. We enjoy low inflation, a sound balance of payments position, and consistent budget surpluses.

All these factors have helped to cushion the impact of the regional turmoil and will help us withstand the tough times ahead. There are, of course, no guarantees but the signs are positive that Singapore can ride out this storm and prosper in the calmer weather that follows.

Over the years, we have been reminding Singaporeans that even as we continue to make economic progress, improve our standard of living, and enjoy peace and stability, we should not take things for granted. We cannot assume that things will always be rosy, because not everything is within our control. Many among the generation of younger Singaporeans who never experienced the turmoil and troubles of Singapore's earlier days thought that such reminders were unnecessary and smacked of a siege mentality. Well, the present financial crisis and the grim economic outlook is stark testimony to the wisdom of the old saying that while we can hope for the best, we must always be prepared for the worst. One of the most striking things about the current crisis is how rapidly the situation deteriorated. Just a year ago, no one could have imagined where the region is today in terms of the serious economic problems facing many countries. If the economic crisis is prolonged and there are repercussions on political stability and civil order, then the peace and stability which has characterised the regional landscape may also be at risk.

That is why it is important that we do not take peace and prosperity for granted. Just as economic prosperity requires correct policies and hard work, peace can only be maintained with constant vigilance and sustained effort. This means building a strong defence capability and, more important, a strong commitment by Singaporeans to the defence of our nation.

The peace and stability we have enjoyed since Singapore's independence has been possible only because we have been willing to invest resources and efforts to build up our defence capability. Only with the security provided by our armed forces, the SAF, were we able to focus our energies on economic development and improving the quality of life of our people. Without a strong defence force, we would not have been able to attract foreign investments that are critical to our continued economic success. That is why we must always continue to invest in national security and defence. Only then can we ensure Singapore's stability, security and prosperity.

But having a strong defence capability is not only about building up the SAF. That is only

Military Defence.

It is also not enough to be concerned only about ensuring a strong economy. That is only Economic Defence. A strong defence capability requires a total effort -- all the five elements of Total Defence -- Military, Economic, Psychological, Social and Civil Defence. A strong defence capability requires the sustained commitment of every single Singaporean. Our people's patriotism and pride in Singapore, our commitment and resoluteness to stand up for Singapore, and even to lay down our lives for our nation if need be; a national mindset that is committed to making contributions to help our nation progress and grow -- that is our Psychological Defence.

And finally, there is Civil Defence. Singaporeans must realise the importance of this so that we are ready to deal with an emergency when we are confronted with one.

These are the elements of Total Defence. This is why Total Defence has to be a critical component of our defence strategy. When Singaporeans take Total Defence seriously, the collective resilience greatly enhances our defence capability. It makes clear to anyone who may have designs on Singapore that they have to contend not only with our armed forces, but with all Singaporeans.

The organisers have chosen to call this exhibition "H.E.R.O.E.S in Total Defence", the focus being on explaining the role of each and every Singaporean. This aptly sums up the essence of Total Defence, which is about all Singaporeans, and the vital roles they play in securing our nation's peace and security. The message of Total Defence is that each and everyone of us, each and every Singaporean, has an important part to play.

It now gives me great pleasure to declare open the "H.E.R.O.E.S in Total Defence" exhibition.

Thank you.

National Archives of Singapore

News Release:

- Total Defence Exhibition Opens to Public (Document No: MINDEF_19980213001.pdf)