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Speech By Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong at the 35 Years Of National Service Commemoration Dinner

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35 YEARS OF NATIONAL SERVICE:
DEFENDING OUR COUNTRY, BONDING OUR PEOPLE

1965: A Time of Uncertainty

37 years is a very short time in the history of nations, and is only a blip in the history of civilisations. It is not enough proof of an enduring Singapore. That is why we constantly worry over our future, and how to bond our people to the country.

We gained our independence twice. The first was from the British in September 1963, and the second from Malaysia in August 1965. The first was what we wanted - independence as part of Malaysia. The second was forced upon us. We had to leave Malaysia to avoid communal conflict. Our relations with Malaysia were strained for several years thereafter, because of the unhappy marriage and acrimonious divorce.

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When Malaysia was formed, Indonesia mounted konfrontasi against Malaysia, including Singapore. Indonesian commandos sneaked into Singapore and set off bombs in MacDonald House at Orchard Road, killing 2 people and injuring 35 others. Konfrontasi continued even after we left Malaysia, and ended only after a change of political leadership in Indonesia brought a new era of cooperation in Southeast Asia.

Further north, the war in Indochina was escalating. The threat of communist insurgency in our region was real.

Such were the circumstances of our country's birth. And as you would expect of any newborn, Singapore was very vulnerable. We had virtually no defence capability.

Our army then consisted of two battalions. Only half the soldiers were Singaporeans. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was escorted to the opening of Singapore's First Parliament by outriders sent by Brigadier Syed Mohamed Alsagoff, the commander of the Malaysian army brigade stationed here. Malaysian soldiers stayed in Singapore until November 1967, more than two years after our independence.

So you see, we had to build up a credible defence force. A strong defence was not just vital for ensuring peace and security. It was also a pre-requisite for our economic development. No businessman was going to put his money in Singapore if we could not assure the safety of his investment.

Decision on National Service

The Government decided to introduce National Service. But there was no guarantee that a conscription system would succeed. In fact, the first call up in 1954 by the British under the National Service Ordinance had failed miserably. Chinese middle-school students had protested and rioted.

Dr Goh Keng Swee, Singapore's first Minister of Interior and Defence, initially proposed to build up a regular army of 12 battalions. But the proposal had to be shelved. The country could not afford it. The two existing battalions were already costing us $20 million a year, a princely sum of money. 12 battalions would have bankrupted the treasury.

Another idea was explored - weekend soldiers. These would be volunteers who would give up their weekends to supplement the regular forces. It was quickly dismissed as an inadequate solution.

Eventually, the Government settled for National Service. The armed forces would comprise a small standing army and a large population of National Servicemen, who, after training, would be placed in reserve. The small standing army would be affordable, while any aggressor would have to take on the whole population, since every Singaporean male would be trained as a soldier.

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National Service was also aimed at nation building. It would develop national consciousness and foster social cohesion. Singaporeans of all strata of society would train shoulder to shoulder in the rain and hot sun, run up hills together, and learn to fight as a team in jungles and built-up areas. Their common experience in National Service would bond them, and shape the Singapore identity and character.

But soldiering did not come naturally to Singaporeans. Our people had to be persuaded. Every Chinese parent knew of the saying that as good steel does not become nails, so good sons do not become soldiers. Also, many people doubted whether urban teenagers could become tough soldiers.

The Government enlisted the support of leaders of chambers of commerce, clan associations, and community and grassroots organisations. They helped the Government to persuade the people of the necessity and benefits of National Service.

These efforts paid off. When the National Service Ordinance (Amendment) Bill was passed in March 1967, there were only a few pockets of demonstration - nothing major or sustained. The first batch of 900 National Servicemen was enlisted in August 1967. This marked the beginning of the SAF.

The timing was fortuitous. Five months later, the British announced that they would accelerate their military pullout from Singapore. They would be gone by the end of 1971. It was unsettling news. But the fact that we had already started to build up our own armed forces gave Singaporeans comfort.

Relevance of National Service Today

The reasons for a National Service armed forces are as relevant and valid today as 35 years ago - to defend our nation, and to bond our people.

The SAF has given us peace and prosperity. It is a deterrence force.

I am happy that the SAF and our National Servicemen have not had to test themselves in wars. As Defence Minister, I had said that if our SAF had to go into action, it would mean that we had failed to deter. Success is when we are able to deter others from threatening our national security and vital interests without having to go into combat.

But if we have to fight, no one must doubt our power, capabilities and determination.

Without this confidence and ability to stare down challenges, Singapore might well have lost its sovereignty by now. For this, we owe a huge debt to our National Servicemen who have served the country these past 35 years.

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In the years ahead, we will continue to depend on them to safeguard Singapore's peace and prosperity. The present security outlook is similar to that in 1965. It is fraught with uncertainty. The regional environment, which deteriorated sharply with the Asian economic crisis, may take some time to stabilise. Non-conventional threats, including terrorism, have taken on much greater significance.

However, we are in a far better situation than in the 1960s. The SAF is now more than two battalions. It is an integrated, tri-Service force of 350,000 men, all of whom are operationally ready. They are equipped with the most modern technologies and hardware. They are well trained. They have the highest standards of professionalism.

Today, we also have capabilities which can be built on to meet new security challenges. For example, National Servicemen have, post 911, helped to secure our Homeland Defence, protecting key national assets like Changi Airport and Jurong Island. Our National Servicemen have also volunteered for UN peacekeeping missions, such as those at the Iraq-Kuwait border and in East Timor.

We can and must build up the SAF's capabilities to handle the wider spectrum of threats. This may require the acquisition of new hardware and technologies, better integration of our systems and responses, and improved organisation.

Is This Place Worth Fighting For?

But all our hardware sophistication will count for nothing without the dedication and fighting spirit of our soldiers. Singaporeans can be justifiably proud - and reassured - of our National Servicemen's whole-hearted commitment to the country. Foreign armed forces who have interacted with the SAF speak highly of the professionalism and commitment of our National Servicemen.

Today, every young Singaporean man, his family, his friends, consider it very natural that the young man should perform that most demanding and noble duty of a citizen - bearing arms in the defence of the country. National Service is a rite of passage for every able-bodied Singaporean male. The sons of our early National Servicemen are now doing National Service. Unlike the early days, parents understand the rationale for National Service. They accept without hesitation the need for their sons to take up arms for Singapore.

Going forward, Singapore will soon be in the hands of 3G Singaporeans, or Third Generation Singaporeans. Our SAF will remain an effective deterrent and capable defence force only if 3G Singaporeans feel strongly that this place is worth protecting and building up. Clearly, the first two generations of Singaporeans feel that Singapore is home, and worth every drop of their sweat and every ounce of their blood. I believe our 3G Singaporeans feel this way too. This is their home, and it is for them to make it better.

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But unlike their parents and grandparents, 3G Singaporeans have many options. They are internationally mobile. Many countries welcome them. They can pursue their dreams outside Singapore.

How to pursue their personal dreams while strengthening Singapore is an issue 3G Singaporeans have to resolve. For if a significant number of Singaporeans pursue their dreams outside Singapore, and worse, quit or abandon Singapore, the question of Singapore's long-term strength and survival must arise.

In other words, pursue your dreams, but align them with the Singapore Dream. If you choose to pursue your dreams overseas, remember also your country. For all its warts and blemishes, Singapore has given you the security and good life you enjoy today. Your parents and

grandparents built it. It was their dream. It is their legacy to you. You have an obligation to take care of it and protect it.

I was cheered by this young man's email to me after my National Day Rally speech. He wrote,

"As a young person who would be enlisting into full time National Service later this afternoon, I find your speech to be encouraging and enriching. It has helped me understand my role better as a male citizen of this country and it has definitely helped me anchor myself into what I would be trained for in the coming two and a half years. I will continue to train hard so that I can better serve my country."

People like him give me confidence that Singapore will endure.

National Service and National Identity

We are still evolving as a nation. Our forefathers were immigrants. We are a multi-racial, multi-religious population. There are fault lines between the different communities and the different religions.

But in National Service, we have a common space where Singaporeans of different racial and religious backgrounds mingle and interact, and live and work closely with one another. They learn to respect and understand one another's lifestyles and practices. They say that in National Service, everyone - whether Chinese, Malay, Indian or Eurasian - is of the same colour: a deep, sunburnt brown! When they have undergone tough military training together, they build enduring friendships. When they learn to fight as one unit, they begin to trust, respect and believe in one another. Should we ever have to go to war to defend Singapore, they will fight for their buddies in their platoon as much as for the country.

The shared experiences of National Service, both during full-time service and over the years of In-Camp Training, have been critical for developing the cohesion and unity that is so vital to the SAF, and to Singapore.

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Tonight, I also want to thank the regulars of the SAF. In appreciating the contributions of our National Servicemen, we should not overlook our regular SAF soldiers. Without the life-long commitment of these regulars to the defence of Singapore, our National Service armed forces would be much less effective. Our regulars are an essential component of our armed forces.

Conclusion

Over the last 35 years, National Service has helped us build a country, and bond our people. Without the defence capability made possible by National Service, Singapore may not have survived, let alone prospered. And without the bonding experience in National Service, we may not have forged the solidarity which we have today.

I know that we ask a great deal of our National Servicemen. They will be at the frontline if ever the button is pushed. They, therefore, have to live up to the high expectations of them. Their training must necessarily be tough. They have to balance the SAF's demands on them, with their career and family. It is not easy. It requires considerable commitment. I am proud of our men. They have carried themselves with distinction both in the SAF and in civilian life.

On behalf of the Government and the people of Singapore, I salute our National Servicemen. I ask Singaporeans to join me to pay tribute to them.

Thank you.

News Release:

- Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong Salutes Our National Servicemen (Document No: MINDEF_20020907001.pdf)

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