



NEWS RELEASE

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Part IV: Looking after our Servicemen

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Safety

Sir, Dr Ong Chit Chung, Mr Tan Soo Khoon, Mr Sin Boon Ann and Ms Irene Ng and others have raised the issue of training and safety. The interest in this subject and the concerns that have been expressed are fully understandable and well placed given that almost every Singaporean family has a son or husband, or other male relative, who is an SAF serviceman doing National Service. I would like to reiterate the assurance I gave Parliament last October, after the tragic deaths of three SAF servicemen during training. The SAF will train our servicemen hard and train them realistically for the defence of Singapore, but we will never compromise on safety nor risk the lives of our servicemen during their training. I am heartened by the very mature response of Singaporeans and Members of the House.

Singaporeans understand the need for the SAF to have tough and realistic training, many have told me so, but they also expect the training to be conducted safely – and rightly so.

They must also have the confidence that if, in spite of the procedures and checks in place, an incident does occur, that MINDEF and the SAF will deal with it professionally and in as open a manner as possible, to uncover any problems and shortcomings, learn from them and prevent a recurrence.

The SAF has completed a full review of its training safety system. The review affirmed that we have in place a strong safety system to support our training. The safety structures, processes and procedures that had been developed over the years are robust. The review also found that for the safety system to work most effectively, there must also be a strong safety culture. This has been pointed out by members of this House, Dr Ong, Mr Tan and others. This is one of the areas of focus of the SAF's efforts to further improve training safety. The enhancement of a safety culture includes emphasising openness, command responsibility, and

an attitude of performing one's job professionally and safely. Safety hotlines have been installed in all three Services to encourage feedback. The SAF has also taken steps to ensure that not just accidents, but near-accidents are thoroughly investigated and lessons learned from them.

Besides enhancing the safety culture, the SAF has also improved the dissemination of safety information within its ranks. A knowledge management system for safety information is currently being set up. The SAF is also studying trend forecasting methods to anticipate and address potential safety problems before they arise.

The review of the training safety system included a full review of lesson plans to ensure that they are up to date. To make sure that training is actually conducted in accordance with the lesson plans, we have stepped up senior commander visits and audits by the Service inspectorates. All instructors and all army commanders now undergo safety-related training before they take up their posts, so that they are well equipped for field training. In addition, all three Services have beefed up their inspectorates and safety sections with additional staff. They are also looking into how best to engage external safety auditors so that we may further improve training safety. We are also bench-marking SAF safety standards against those of established armed forces.

The review concluded that medical coverage for SAF training was adequate. Nonetheless, we have made a number of improvements to the medical support system. Training centres now have advanced resuscitation equipment such as defibrillators. Additional training for first responder resuscitation is conducted for both medical and non-medical personnel. This means that more and better first-line medical response can be provided in the field. The training for medical vocationalists has been revised so that our doctors and medics are current in advanced life-saving skills.

The SAF is working hard to maintain high training and safety standards. The review that we have just completed has led to several measures being implemented, as I have enumerated.

But safety has to be a constant, ongoing concern. I assure Members that attention to safety will continue to be of the highest priority for the SAF. We have a substantially good system, but we know that we can always try harder and improve – and we will.

Compensation

Sir, on a related matter raised by Dr Ong – the issue of compensation for SAF servicemen was raised in Parliament last October. I informed Parliament then that MINDEF would carry out a review of the compensation issue.

MINDEF compensates servicemen for death and injury sustained due to military service in accordance with the SAF Regulations. While the basic compensation provided is based on the provisions in the Workmen's Compensation Act, MINDEF also has the flexibility to pay up to 30% in additional compensation in cases where circumstances merit this. In exceptional

circumstances, MINDEF has also paid compensation beyond the 30% cap

The principles that MINDEF applies in computing the compensation amount are consistent with the legal principles applied by the civil courts in assessing damages for injuries and deaths. I am satisfied that MINDEF's current framework is essentially adequate to provide fair and reasonable compensation to our servicemen

I have directed MINDEF to formalise these arrangements into a framework for compensation. This framework will provide greater clarity for decisions on compensation for deaths and injuries sustained due to military service, according to the merits of each case.

In addition, I have asked that for the purpose of compensation, MINDEF treat Full-time National Servicemen and NSmen on par with regular soldiers. This means that for deaths due to service, we will also provide a lump-sum pension of a minimum of one year's equivalent regular's pay in addition to the compensation.

Aside from compensation, there is also a range of additional benefits, such as welfare grants from the SAF Benevolent Fund and a dependants' pension depending on the family's financial circumstances. There is also a comprehensive group insurance scheme which our soldiers are encouraged to take up. It provides coverage of up to \$400,000 at affordable premiums of \$16 per month for every \$100,000 of coverage.

Sir, MINDEF knows that no amount of compensation or benefits will alleviate the grief or make up for the loss to the serviceman's family. However, with these improvements to our compensation framework, we will be in a better position to compensate our servicemen's families as fairly as possible.

Retirement and SAVER Scheme

Sir, Dr Ong Chit Chung has asked about the SAVER scheme. We have a policy of keeping the SAF young. With the threat environment and war-fighting becoming ever more complex, the timely renewal of the SAF leadership is key if we want to keep the SAF dynamic, vigorous and forward-looking, with a constant supply of fresh ideas and receptiveness to new concepts and change. This is the best way to make sure that our generals are always prepared to fight the next war and not be trapped trying to fight the last war.

In 1998, MINDEF implemented a 23-year career for our officers. This maintains a balance between the requirement for experience while ensuring timely leadership renewal. This also means that the individual officer is still young enough to acquire the skills and knowledge to make a switch in career, and he has enough working years left to have a meaningful second career.

To support this new career structure, MINDEF introduced the SAVER scheme. This scheme offers our officers accelerated career advancement and a very good salary and benefits

package. A key feature of SAVER is a generous superannuation scheme to support their transition to a civilian career when they leave the SAF. This is designed such that an SAF officer in his 23-year career would earn close to 75% of what his private sector counterpart would earn in a 40-year career. Since its inception, the SAVER scheme has met its objectives of improved recruitment and retention of officers and timely leadership renewal.

Currently, MINDEF is enhancing the career transition programme to provide better support to those officers who are leaving as the employment environment in recent years has been more difficult. The programme offers career counselling, networking opportunities and outplacement services in preparation for their career transition.

Dr Ong has also referred to some complaints by retired officers that they did not get good returns from the SAVER scheme. Now, let me explain. The SAVER fund is no different from other pension funds, it's invested and we have explained to our officers that they should take the long-term view. In fact the returns are slightly higher than the benchmark which the fund compares itself to. SAVER benefits are invested with a view to giving good returns over the long term, based on a strategy of balanced asset allocation. There may however be a few years when the performance of the fund is negative, and there may be a small minority who leave the SAF at that point where the returns are negative. The performance of the fund as I've said so far, have been better than our benchmark, and better than numerous established pension funds in the market. Our officers also have the option. They can move their retirement benefits into a more conservative portfolio two years before their retirement, depending on their risk appetite. But of course if they do that and if the investment makes exceptional gains in those two years, then they will not benefit from those exceptional gains. But those are the risk-return benefits. However, having now run the fund for about six years, MINDEF is reviewing the fund structure to fine-tune it to see whether there are better options, more options, that can be developed to meet the needs of the fund members at the various points of their careers.

Sir, good and strong leadership in the SAF is vital and cannot be compromised. MINDEF will ensure that our employment schemes continue to attract officers of a quality which can meet the demands required of those who shoulder the responsibility of safeguarding our nation's defence and security.

Part V: Conclusion

Sir, I am most heartened by the degree of support which Honourable Members have shown for the need to ensure Singapore's defence and security. Underlying many of the points which they have raised is the recognition that security is the basic building block of our nation's well-being. Without security, economic development, social progress, and nation-building cannot proceed. I would also like to take this opportunity to express appreciation for the support that Members of this House and Singaporeans in general demonstrated for the SAF through the difficult times last year. That brought the people and the SAF closer together. It also helped to reinforce confidence in the SAF, and strengthened deterrence.

Thank you, Sir.

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