



NEWS RELEASE

Visit <http://www.mindef.gov.sg> for more news and information about MINDEF and the SAF

Speech by Dr Ng Eng Hen, Minister for Defence, at the Debate on the President's Address 2014

29 May 2014

Madam Speaker, I support the Motion of thanks to the President.

Nearly 50 years after independence, the President said, the world has changed on us. So too, the transformation of the SAF which has been nothing short of dramatic. When the SAF was formed, very few believed that it could robustly defend this island. You look at our island that has no strategic depth and limited resources. This dim prognosis on our defence capabilities was not unwarranted, considering that when the SAF started out, we had very basic capabilities. Today you are used to our command and control systems. But when the SAF started out, our C2 system was six high frequency radio sets which we didn't even buy but took over from the 4th Malaysian Signals Squadron. We had two wooden hull boats for our Navy, and no aircraft to speak of.

Today, the SAF is a widely respected professional military force, capable of deterring would-be aggressors and responding to an array of security challenges. Jane's Defence Weekly, a respected military journal, commented recently that "the SAF has consistently evolved during its four decades in existence to become one of Asia's most modern fighting forces". Our defence capabilities have indeed come a long way.

Critical to the success of building up a credible SAF is National Service (NS) for a simple reason. National servicemen form the bulk of the SAF. If there is a need to mobilise the SAF to defend Singapore, for whatever reason, there is no standby force that we can activate first before calling on our national servicemen. Our national servicemen know this. Our national servicemen are our first and main responders.

So when the Committee to Strengthen NS (CSNS) was formed, we wanted to carefully assess the level of public support for NS. We commissioned the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) to conduct a rigorous and objective survey. The results were gratifying - and let me share some main findings. 98% of respondents agree that NS is crucial for national defence and for securing Singapore's peace and prosperity, 97% feel that NS instils discipline, and 94% acknowledge that NS provides opportunities to learn something useful. When they presented to me these figures, I said, "Too good to be true. Must be selection bias, or the time you called, or the households you went to." The researcher was fairly taken aback, he said, "No, this is very rigorous, we looked at it. No different from other studies we did. This will stand up to scrutiny and scientific rigour; objective survey, across the population." These are remarkably high support levels for any national issues, let alone NS.

Is support for national conscription the norm for other countries? On the contrary, Singapore remains one of very few countries able to sustain an NS system. When we started NS 47 years ago, many other countries across the world had similar conscript systems. It has now dwindled to very few countries that have been able to maintain an NS of meaningful periods, and capable of having a conscript military force. Many countries, particularly European countries, abolished their NS. Some in response to the end of the Cold War to reap the peace dividend. Others have basically dismantled their NS system, not because their threats have disappeared but because public support waned. Members would know which countries these are, I don't have to name them specifically. But many of their leaders of these countries that have done so - given up their National Service - lament privately that they know it was a mistake but could not stop it. So what explains Singaporeans' public support for NS? I believe, first and foremost, NS support has been built on the service of 900,000 national servicemen who have discharged their NS duties. Everyone faithfully, dutifully, did his duties. Here we want to place on record the appreciation of this House for all national servicemen who have served, and recognition of their contributions. To keep NS support strong, we must continuously maintain an open system that enforces NS duties equitably and never undermine the key principle that all male Singaporean Citizens and 2nd Generation Permanent Residents must perform their duties, regardless of race, religion, or social background.

Why did we form a CSNS, when public support was so high? 98%. The simple answer is that this would be the best time to conduct the review to ensure that NS remains responsive and relevant to a new generation of Millennial national servicemen who will defend Singapore. Better to hear them now and adjust policies, rather than wait and assume previous policies will work even when circumstances have changed.

And circumstances have indeed changed. Family size is smaller which means that the burden on national servicemen to support their dependents is greater, whether their own

families, or their parents. The proportion of national servicemen seeking higher education has gone up considerably. Work life has also changed - leaner staff, more responsibilities, more travel, tighter work schedules and deadlines were all feedback that we listened to carefully.

Therefore, motivating national servicemen will also have to change. Especially when this new generation of national servicemen has no direct experience of our early struggles. The Committee therefore took in views from over 40,000 who participated in our focus group discussions, Town Hall Session, webchat, and dialogue sessions in the NS units. I want to thank members of my committee and the sub-committees who were working very hard and reaching out and spending time, speaking to not only national servicemen but also members of the public. Many others provided suggestions through emails, letters, and our website.

We have presented our report and recommendations to MPs and the public - you would have received a copy. With your permission, Madam Speaker, I have asked the clerks to distribute an abridged version of all our recommendations. Overall, the response has been positive and the Committee is thankful for this. Some have said that we struck the right tone, by capturing the wide range of sentiments and ideas from the focus group participants. Indeed, we reproduced some of their direct feedback in our report because we wanted to capture the essence of what they said and their main points. The Committee was careful not only to recommend actions that were easy to implement. On the contrary, recommendations like shorter NS waiting times or matching aptitudes to vocations have huge administrative impact. Others commended the Committee for also explaining why some suggestions were not taken up, for example, priority places in primary schools and other aspects because we could have easily said yes. But if we give priority to all NSmen then nobody gets priority.

I want to thank many MPs who have spoken out in support of the Committee's recommendations - Mr Sitoh Yih Pin, Mr Alex Yam, Mr Pritam Singh, MP Ellen Lee, and Eugene Tan. If adopted by the Government, how will the recommendations strengthen NS? Well, pre-enlistees can look forward to shorter waiting times before enlistment. The Committee has set a limit of six months that the SAF should impose on itself and for 90% of pre-enlistees to start NS within four months of finishing their post-secondary education - it's double the current 45%. In other words, under the current system, 45% of pre-enlistees are called up after they finish their post-secondary education, that is ITE, Polytechnic or "A" Levels. Committee says, double this to 90%. 90% to be called up within 4 months and set the absolute cap at 6 months, reduce the waiting time. The SAF has studied this recommendation- as I said, it's one with huge administrative impact because we are dealing with about 20,000 national servicemen every year. The SAF, the SPF and the SCDF have studied this recommendation carefully

and if accepted by Government, this will be implemented as early as the middle of next year. The usual June and September intakes will be brought forward to May and August, respectively, which are mainly Polytechnic graduates. Enlisting them earlier will mean that they will get into the workforce faster because they will complete it earlier. It also means that Polytechnic students, enlisted previously in September and bound for local universities in August, will not need to be disrupted as, previously it was two years and they had to be disrupted before they finish. Because if we bring it earlier, they will now be able to complete their NS before they go to universities. ITE students will also benefit from a shorter wait time. Similarly, "A" Levels graduates will be enlisted a month earlier starting December next year. I say this very quickly, but I tell you that my SAF commanders are sweating over this because they are juggling it. Each batch is about five, six, seven thousand and they are wondering how do we do this. But they have studied it, they are confident they can do it. We give them the full support if Government accepts it. We see some changes.

We will have a larger Regular instructor core to train and lead our full-time national servicemen (NSFs). This will strengthen the transmission of values and the effectiveness of our NS training. We will still require NSFs to be trainers but those who are trainers will have the benefit of learning and working alongside experienced Regulars amongst them. Because for this core of Regular trainers, this will be their core expertise - they will train batch after batch, learn from it. We have recommended 1,100 more for SAF, 230 for the HomeTeam and we expect that more Regular trainers and the use of technology-enabled instruction will translate to better and faster learning, and shorter training periods eventually.

At the same time, more NSFs can become commanders - an increase in the proportion of officers and specialists from 30% to 40% - as a 3rd Generation SAF, our SPF, our SCDF, more nimble requires its sub-units and commanders to act accordingly. We're using more technology, we're asking commanders and units to respond more quickly. Such appointments will be based on qualifications and merit. For the first time, we will ask NSFs to indicate their preferred vocations. Where would you like to go? This is another headache which my commanders are grappling with. Similarly SPF and SCDF. Anytime we give choice to everyone, not all will get their first or even second choice, - that is what happens for schools. But should we say, "No choice, we decide"? The Committee deliberated this, said even though some, not all, will get their first and second choice, this should not deter us. Because giving choice will better match aptitudes to vocation and allow people who want to contribute in areas that they think they have strength in to do so. We will also accredit skills under the Workforce Skills Qualifications framework that national servicemen pick up in areas such as leadership, and technical and specialist vocations. So that after NS, if they pick up skills within NS and they are WSQ-certified, it will enhance their employability after NS. This is particularly so for ITE and

Polytechnic graduates. MINDEF will also work with MOE, tertiary institutions, and economic agencies to facilitate a smoother and shorter transition to work and studies after NS. NSmen were saying, "We have to wait again after we finish National Service" - whether it is to work or many of them to universities. We will work with the agencies. I think this is a much difficult piece because there are many pieces we have to consider but we want to commit to shortening that period and facilitating their transition to work and studies.

The SAF Volunteer Corps (SAFVC) is another big deal and will allow women, 1st Generation Permanent Residents, and new citizens to serve alongside our national servicemen. The IPS survey showed widespread support - 80% - for this recommendation. I am glad that many MPs in this house, Sitoh Yi Pin, Mr. Pritam Singh, also voiced their approval for this recommendation. However, others have said that the SAFVC can never match the commitment and contributions of national servicemen. It may be so. But we ought to let this scheme evolve and not judge it prematurely. One of our committee members felt compelled to respond on her own accord when this was being discussed at Parliament. This is Dr. Luisa Lee. She is a medical doctor, she is on our Committee. Let me quote for you her letter, "I volunteered as a medical officer as a 30-year-old and mother of two sons then and felt privileged and proud to serve 20 years in the SAF alongside its men and women, seeing first-hand why Singapore needs a strong defence. On reflection, I count my years as a volunteer in the SAF to be a most fulfilling and an important part of my life. The added bonus was that," she continues, "as a mother, I could relate to what my three sons were going through," she must have had another one after she volunteered, "when they enlisted into full-time NS, and when they served their In-Camp Training. They were encouraged by the fact that I had voluntarily undergone the training and sacrifice and they understood that at the heart of their onerous training and sacrifice, is the essence of NS as a duty and an honour for the country. It is worth noting that people who eventually decide to join the SAFVC are not compelled by law; neither will they be doing it because they are asked to. They will be doing it because they want to. There will be a select group of people with such commitment and this scheme will provide them the opportunity to serve the nation in their own meaningful way." Dr Luisa Lee. Dr Lee told me during one of our committee meetings, that she has four grandsons who will eventually go to NS. Just imagine the scene, her grandchildren come back and say "Oh I'm doing NS." Grandma says, "Not a big deal. Just do it." We need that kind of inclusion for people who don't have the liabilities and yet say "I want to do my part for Singapore's defence." I say don't judge it prematurely. Let it evolve, because it can be very, very positive for Singapore, for our families.

And the volunteers will be trained and meaningfully deployed. The SPF and SCDF have operated the Volunteer Special Constabulary and the Civil Defence Auxiliary Unit, respectively, for a much longer time. Their volunteers work alongside Regulars and

national servicemen, and perform similar duties. You might have had encounters with them not knowing that they are volunteers. So just like the SPF and SCDF, I believe that the SAFVC can make a similar impact.

We recognise the increasing pressures of work and studies for operationally-ready national servicemen (NS-men). And we will provide them more time for NS-men to prepare for their Individual Physical Proficiency Test (IPPT) and ease travel restrictions. At the same time, we must maintain acceptable standards of fitness and will encourage this through better incentives for NS-men to do well in their IPPT.

On recognition for NS-men, many Singaporeans have expressed their concerns that too many benefits for NS-men would dilute what it means to serve the country. We agree that the benefits we give must reflect the right values of service to the country. The Committee therefore proposed to revamp the existing NS Recognition Award, NSRA, into the NS Housing, Medical and Education (HOME) Awards to reflect a stake in this home that NS-men defend that in turn helps them in building a life here. The HOME Awards will have a substantial Medisave grant - an additional \$6,000 to the existing \$9,000, or \$10,500 for commanders. The \$9,000 and \$10,500 currently can be used for housing and education. We will add a \$6,000 Medisave component. Because the Committee thought that the Medisave contributions to provide medical coverage would be timely with the proposed introduction of Medishield Life. Even as we do this, benefits for NS must never dilute the spirit of service - that is for duty, honour and country.

The recommendations require a significant commitment of resources on the part of the Government. We costed it and it will cost us about \$4.5 billion over the next decade. It is a significant investment. However, the Committee believes that this set of recommendations strikes the right balance in responding to the needs of national servicemen and allowing them to contribute more as national servicemen and volunteers. The Committee therefore recommends that the Government accept and fully support these recommendations and I hope members of this House will endorse them.

At the same time, community and employers can also provide stronger support to NS-men through the restructured Advisory Council on Community Relations in Defence (ACCORD) which some of you sit on, including members from both parties, to deepen engagement with NS stakeholders such as employers and businesses, education institutions, as well as family and community.

When these initiatives are fully implemented, the benefits to our national servicemen and more importantly, Singapore, will be substantial. If we do this well, we will continue to nurture another generation of national servicemen who know what they are fighting for, and are able and committed to defend Singapore. It will be a stronger NS system and a

stronger SAF for the next generation - a strong defence that provides us the confidence and assurance of a secure future.

Madam Speaker, before I conclude, let me also address what MPs have brought up regarding Malays in the SAF. First, I am glad that all MPs here acknowledged that there has been progress. We are in a very different and much better position than 20 to 30 years ago, or even 10 years ago. Today, Malays are indeed in all Services of the SAF. Mr Pritam Singh shared how he personally witnessed Malay servicemen in a combat engineer unit.

Defence Ministers before me have informed this House and I will do so again today, that deployments of soldiers into vocations and their promotions are based on merit, capability, and aptitude, as well as their commitment to the SAF and Singapore, regardless of race or religion. And over the years, Malays have made significant strides in skills and educational attainment. So we now have Malays in all Services - whether as pilots in the Air Force, as commandos, combat engineers, artillery men in the Army, and in the Navy which MP Intan shared.

The SAF has been doing this quietly and progressively, without fanfare, applying the principles of merit and aptitude. Which means that every Malay soldier who is posted to any vocation or unit, got there on his own merit. Some of you may ask because some of you have said that there is a perception out there, why not do it with great publicity, greater fanfare? There is a simple reason. I have many senior Malay commanders within the SAF. I meet them from time to time, not because they are Malays but because I meet senior commanders. To take any actions based on race, even if it is an affirmative action, puts us onto the path of tokenism. None of us in this House want this, or have called for it, nor do all my Malay soldiers and commanders who have earned their positions on sheer merit alone. Many of these senior Malay commanders have been asked to profile themselves by the Malay community. The Malay community is proud of them, they want to erase some misconceptions, they say, "We want to profile you." But the Malay commanders tell me, they reply: "Why should I do so? Why should I push myself out? In the SAF, I have been promoted because of what I have accomplished and am capable of, not because I am Malay. As a commander, I lead my men. Not Malay, Chinese, or Indian men, but all my men. And I am not their Malay, Chinese or Indian commander, but just their commander. No one purposely draws attention to my race within the SAF." And these Malay senior commanders want to keep it that way. I think these words from Malay senior commanders spoken in private are the most eloquent statement of how far we have come and how we must continue to progress.

We will continue to expand the opportunities for all Singaporeans, regardless of race and religion. This is one of the main recommendations of the Committee to Strengthen NS to

empower every Singaporean to do more through National Service. Singapore needs it and the SAF wants it. Thank you.

National Archives of Singapore