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SPEECH BY PROF. WONG LIN KEN, MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS,
AT INAUGURAL MEETING OF NARCOTICS ASSOCIATION AT THE
COUNCIL OF SOCIAL SERVICES, PENANG LANE, ON FRIDAY, 3RD
MARCH 1972 AT 6.30 P.M.

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We are gathered here to-day for a solemn social mission. Its success will depend on a number of factors. First, there are sufficient public-spirited individuals willing to contribute their time and services. Second, there are sufficient institutions willing to lend their organizational strength and, when necessary, financial support. Last but not least, the leadership of the Narcotics Association of Singapore is dynamic and imaginative.

The size of the gathering present here is sufficient evidence that there are citizens and institutions in our Republic interested in contributing their share in tackling the drug situation. Indeed, one of the principal reasons for forming the Narcotics Association of Singapore is to mobilize and channelize into constructive action, public support and voluntary work to deal with drug abuse in the Republic. The other reason is that the government cannot completely shoulder all the responsibilities of dealing with drug-abuse. The public must supplement the efforts of government.

On 21st February, this year, the International Narcotics Control Board, reported that drug abuse has become a world problem. It is described as a crisis facing humanity. Indeed, in some countries, the situation is truly serious. However, it is essential to see our drug situation in its proper perspective. We have the beginnings of drug-abuse. It is not possible to measure accurately the size of this habit, for the drug trade has this unique feature. There are no complaining witnesses or victims: There are only sellers and willing buyers. Our arrest figures for drug offences last year indicate the government should take action to nip in the bud what can grow into a national problem, if left unchecked. Last year, there were 2,202 arrests, the youngest offender being 14 years old. What is disturbing is the increasing use of ganja and MX pills among the youths. Fortunately, heroin has not made a major entry into the scene. Five persons were charged with possession of heroin.

The reasons why people take to drugs are complex. They are hidden somewhere in the conditions of modern urban life, competition in an industrial society, and in the complexities of mental disorder. Because we are moving rapidly into an industrial urban society, it is imperative we take all appropriate steps to ensure we do not follow the drug-laden paths of other industrial societies.

The responsibilities of government are threefold:-

- (i) to ensure that none of the prohibited drugs enters illegally into Singapore and reaches the consumers. The main burden of this work falls on the newly-created Central Narcotics Bureau, which has also established intelligence links with other countries.
- (ii) to generate a climate of social sanction against the use of drugs and to educate the public on the dangers of drug abuse.
- (iii) to provide treatment, rehabilitation, and counselling services.

The Central Narcotics Bureau will co-ordinate the efforts of the various Ministries in dealing with drug abuse. On the enforcement side, it will co-ordinate the work of the Police, Customs, and the Health officials. On the educational, preventive, and welfare side, it will work with other Ministries. The role of the Ministry of Education is educational and preventive, centred primarily on the provision of drug abuse education in the curriculum. This Ministry will also operate a system of counselling and guidance. Treatment and rehabilitation of drug addicts will be provided by the Ministry of Health, while the Ministry of Social Affairs will continue to provide compulsory supervision to drug offenders sent by the Court.

It is in the areas not covered by the various Ministries that the Narcotics Association of Singapore can complement the efforts of government, especially in drug education and counselling. The Central Narcotics Bureau will work in full co-operation with the Association.

The next stage in the programme of action is to introduce legislation providing for enhanced punishment. When it is ready, it will be made public. Throughout the world, drug laws have been based generally on the promise that drug abuse has to be suppressed, and this can be done on the use of criminal enforcement and penal sanctions. They range from laws giving the judges discretion to impose punishment according to the gravity of the offence, as is the practice in many countries, to mandatory minimum terms of imprisonment, increasing in severity with repeated offences, as in the case in the United States. In more recent years, the death penalty has been introduced for traffickers in Korea, Taiwan, South Vietnam, Iran and Thailand. The proposed legislation will not be as Draconian as to introduce the death penalty, but, the enhanced punishment, if effectively enforced, should serve as a deterrent.

On this note, I will end this address. Suffice it only for me to say thank you to all of you, and to wish the Association every success in its endeavour.

Date: 3rd March, 1972.