

## SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT PRESS STATEMENT

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Speech by Dr. Yeoh Ghin Seng, Speaker, Parliament of Singapore, at the Commissioning Ceremony of SAF Officers at the Istana on 21st February 1974 at 6.30 pm.

The SAF is charged with the responsibility of defending the independence and integrity of our republic. There is no more important task than this, as every one will willingly agree. However in times of peace and tranquillity, people are apt to forget how important it is that we have the means available to ensure our independence. In Singapore, when times are good, and business is booming, people assume that good fortune lasts forever.

But we should not forget that in the world today, troubles do break out from time to time in various places, now in one part of the world and then in another, and later yet elsewhere.

In our part of the world, fighting has been going on continuously in the Indo-China peninsula for almost 30 years. We have not been affected by that war so far. But in other states of South-east Asia, including our own, violence in the form of civil disorders or armed insurgencies, is not an infrequent occurrence.

Until a new power equilibrium has been established in Asia, and no one knows when this will be or what form it will take, we are likely to see in South-east Asia the recurrence of tension and trouble of one kind or another, often taking place suddenly and unexpectedly.

The SAF is a form of insurance for us and the money we spend on it is an insurance premium. However this is not the only safeguard we have against possible trouble. We need an economic policy which will produce a better life for our citizens, improving year by year. We need a foreign policy which will make as many friends and as few enemies as possible without conceding our vital interests.

Our security, both internal and external, will be better assured if we achieve a judicious combination in these three fields of state policy - in defence, economics and foreign affairs. We should not resort to excessive reliance on one to the detriment of the other two. This is what our government is trying to achieve and whether we have struck the right balance, only history can tell. So far, the record shows that our policy is about right.

When I said that the SAF is an insurance policy, this must not be taken too literally. The SAF consists of people and the efficacy of the SAF depends on how the people who belong to it carry out their duties.

It is not only a matter of numbers but also of quality. And quality includes a number of attributes, some of which are physical such as health and fitness of the soldiers and some of the others depend on skills such as the quality and the content of instruction, the training systems used and their application in exercises of lessons taught in courses.

In a fighting organisation, such as the SAF, one factor that determines quality is perhaps more important than any other and that is motivation. Poorly motivated soldiers will learn very little, no matter how good the content of the training courses or the skills or experience of instructors. They are not likely to fight well even with the best weapons. Contrariwise, we have seen, in recent history, poorly equipped soldiers performing astonishing feats of valour when they are inspired by some cause.

Some people, observing the fanaticism with which communist soldiers fight, for instance the Vietcong, and learning that this is partly the result of intense political indoctrination, have come to

the conclusion that we should motivate our soldiers in the same way. This view is based on a superficial understanding of the issues involved, which are wide-ranging and complex.

I cannot therefore go into the subject in any detail. But I can point out how and why political indoctrination of the kind used in <sup>the</sup> communist armies is not practical in the SAF.

The recruits we enlist in the SAF have gone through our schools where they absorb both knowledge and form certain attitudes. They come from various walks of life and in their homes they absorb ideas and values from their family circles. Even when in the army, they cannot be isolated from the rest of Singapore; they read the same newspapers as others, they see the same radio and TV and cinema programmes and can read any book and magazine available in our book shops or libraries.

In an open society like ours, different people have different views and attitudes and will resist coercion into uniformity. We cannot transform people into unthinking robots, even in the army. This applies as much to our soldiers as it does to soldiers of other democratic countries. When it comes to a crunch, whether such soldiers fight well or not depends on whether they believe, of their own free will, that they have something worth fighting for.

As you can see, this is a very big issue. We can take comfort in that the experience of great conflicts of the past, such as the two world wars, 1914 to 1918 and 1939 to 1945, does not prove that the more militaristic nations with more intense methods of political indoctrination had triumphed in the end. It will be truer to say that the more democratic side won each time.

The lesson for us is clear. We must always so manage our affairs that our citizens feel that their independence is worth preserving and fighting for. The great progress we have made in recent years has benefitted most if not all our citizens. This would not have been possible if we were not an independent nation. All would be lost if we lost our independence.

This is widely understood by people in Singapore, rich or poor, well-educated or not. This is one of the reasons why the sacrifices of national service have been borne so willingly. I believe that if it ever came to the crunch, our soldiers will believe they have something worth preserving and worth fighting for - our independence.

It now remains for me to congratulate the officers on their commissions and to wish them well in their future appointments.