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SPEECH BY MR A RAHIM ISHAK, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE
FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS, AT THE OPENING OF THE FIRST
WORLD PRINT CONGRESS, ORGANISED BY THE MASTER PRINTERS'
ASSOCIATION AT THE MANDARIN HOTEL ON 24 APRIL 1978
AT 9.10 A.M.

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I am pleased to be here this morning for the opening of the First World Print Congress, organised by the Master Printers' Association. Singapore is proud to play host to this gathering of distinguished master printers and executives of the printing industry from around the globe. We interpret your presence here as recognition of Singapore as a growing centre of the printing trade. We are still a long way from the level of development of the industry attained in Australia, Japan, Europe and North America. But we are gratified by the progress achieved in the last ten years, thanks to the input of investments and expertise from foreign sources, some of whom are represented here today.

The printing industry is an important part of the communication process as it fosters learning and the dissemination of knowledge as well as the enjoyment of life through the printed word. It needs to keep pace with the ever expanding demand for information. There is still a large part of the world that does not have adequate reading material, because it does not have the purchasing power to obtain the publications it requires. Paradoxically it is this part of the world, the developing countries, which are in most need of the printed instructions and knowledge to support their economic and social development.

The printing industry should come to grips with this aspect of cost to the consumer when it considers the cost of its new technology and methods. It would be doing a great service to the unlettered masses of the world if it would come up with some way to make more printed matter available to more people who need them. There is a glut of printed matter in the advanced countries, but a famine situation in

books in the less developed countries. A preferential system to enable a more equitable distribution of books and publications to the less well off countries could well be the answer, if there is the will to find the way to do it.

The Singapore Government is deeply concerned about cost and quality in the printing industry, and supports all efforts to reduce the former and improve the latter. We have various incentive schemes to upgrade the technology and raise the skills of the manpower in the industry, as well as to encourage it to seek export markets. However, we recognise that the crucial factor is the entrepreneurial drive and management talents of the master printers and executives of the printing industry. Their capacity to keep abreast of and apply the latest technology will determine the progress of the industry.

The way forward has been shown by the bigger printing and publishing houses which have expanded and modernised their operations, going into longruns, quality printing of books, technical as well as general, and venturing into export markets. We take satisfaction in the fact that one of the leading publishing houses in Singapore is supplying textbooks to countries in Africa. As costs go up in developed countries, the publishers in these countries might usefully consider contracting their printing to Singapore firms, or even setting up branch operations or joint ventures here. Singapore's membership of the UNESCO Agreement, on the Importation of Educational, Scientific and Cultural Materials, offers an area of opportunity for the export of printed material. The Agreement permits members to export duty free to other member countries books, publications, periodicals, works of art and other materials of educational, scientific and cultural value. Singapore based printers would be able to compete in this area without the obstacles of duties, tariffs and non-tariff barriers.

The Republic's policy of encouraging foreign investments, especially in skill and capital-intensive fields, is conducive to the setting up of ventures in the printing business. Other factors which add to its attractiveness are Singapore's membership of ASEAN with its potential big market for printed matter, its ideal location in Southeast Asia and its status as a major air and sea junction. In addition to the incentives for export-oriented industries, printers and publishers can avail themselves of relatively low postal rates, further reduced

through a special postal incentive scheme for bulk posting of promotional materials and magazines introduced in 1977.

The Congress is being held at a time when the printing industry in Singapore and elsewhere is faced with the problems of supply of materials, new technology, management, manpower and, most crucial, markets. I am sure the master printers and industry executives will address their minds to these problems and hopefully come up with some pointers to the new horizons opening before us.

The printing world has come a long way from the Gutenberg press to the computer printout by way of advanced communications technology. Frankly, Mr Chairman, I am a little overwhelmed. I cut my teeth on a newspaper which began printing on a flat press way back in 1939. However, I believe the object of the printing industry has not changed fundamentally from those days. It is basically to inform, to communicate.

The printed word played an important role in those days to arouse nationalism among the people of colonial territories and fed the struggle for independence through the newspapers, pamphlets and books. After independence the printing industry has been usefully employed in the service of nation-building. The political leadership has had to inform and educate and take the people with it in its tasks of building up the necessary infrastructures for economic and social development. The dissemination of ideas and publicising of goals through posters and other publications has been an integral part of the development process in Singapore in such fields as public health and increasing productivity in industry. Effective communication not least through the printed word has been a key instrument in mobilising our human resources for national progress. By the same token the dissemination of revolutionary political doctrine or ideology which is not geared to nation-building or raising productivity, but quite the reverse objectives, has also been the function of the printed word. Whether it is the Roman alphabet or the Chinese ideograph, we have to be aware of the double-edged nature of the printed word and make sure that it is used with responsibility.

There has been a gigantic communication explosion in recent years as a result of the development of new technology in printing, telecommunications, radio and television. Instant communication around

the globe via satellite brings world events into the living room as they occur. Truly the world has become a global village. But I wonder if it is not also a rather confused one. There is too much of communications in the technical sense. I am not sure if all these outpourings of words and sounds are being absorbed, or whether they are just becoming one torrential babble drowning out whatever ideas men may be trying to convey to one another. The business of communications seems to have replaced the communication of ideas and information.

In the old days a lack of communications was often the cause of misunderstanding between peoples and nations. Today an overdose of communications has not removed misunderstanding, but often compounded it with misinformation or distortion of fact by the sensational presentation of word and deed. A speech delivered for home consumption in one country is instantly transmitted across the globe and represented as a foreign policy statement. Sometimes one asks the question: Where do communications end and communication begin?

I would like to believe that the key to resolving this dilemma is the printed word. When the live telecasts and documentaries are out of sight they quite often go out of mind too. The printed word remains etched in the consciousness, for it stirs the imagination, evokes thought and spurs action. The computerised electronic age cannot sustain itself without the printed word to buttress it and expand its horizon. The printing industry can ensure its survival by not becoming a slave to the new technology but by harnessing the new technology to the ultimate objective of the printing industry, which is the dissemination of knowledge and the creation of a better informed and a more enlightened world.

It gives me great pleasure to declare this First World Print Congress open.
