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Subject: (EMBARGOED) Speech by Dr Aline Wong, 17 Apr 00, 9am

Singapore Government

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**OPENING ADDRESS OF DR ALINE WONG, SENIOR MINISTER OF
STATE FOR EDUCATION, AT THE RELC MILLENNIUM SEMINAR
ON LANGUAGE CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION IN
MULTICULTURAL SOCIETIES, ON MONDAY 17 APRIL 2000, 9.00
AM, AT THE RELC AUDITORIUM, 30 ORANGE GROVE ROAD**

National Archives of Singapore

Mrs Goh Chi Lan, Director of SEAMEO Regional Language Centre

Your Excellencies

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am honoured to be invited to officiate at this opening ceremony. This is especially so since this is RELC's Millennium Conference which is a good

time to take a fresh look at curriculum issues in multicultural societies. It is laudable for RELC to take a global look at this big area of language education as we cross into a new era of changing circumstances.

2 In the case of Southeast Asia, the situation is even more complicated with our rich language heritages against which we must juxtapose the need for a language curriculum that will empower our citizens to communicate successfully with a world dominated by science, technology and the internet. There are certain segments of society that view the need to preserve national values and languages as being pitted against the desirability of participating in a world in which there are no restrictions in terms of communication, commerce and the flow of knowledge. The issue is whether the two need to be pitted against each other? Or, whether the two can co-exist together? To strike a balance between competing claims has never been an easy task. That there is no easy solution is the reason why we are here today to examine some of the key issues before us.

3 The countries in the region are fast being drawn into the global community. To prepare their citizens for the challenges, the countries are taking a hard look at their curricula with a view to making them instruments of empowerment. Some countries for instance have gone beyond the tradition of aiming for academic excellence by making important changes in the school curriculum to prepare students for a knowledge-based economy, promote creativity, and cultivate a habit of life-long learning.

4 We all aim to educate a new generation of citizens with a new mindset, with innovative talents and an ability to handle uncertainties and changes. In the area of language curriculum, we are all working towards a fine-tuning of the language skills expected at both the first and second language levels. Some countries in the region have also been revamping their language policies and are introducing the teaching of English at earlier years in their students' school life. This is in recognition of the value of the English language as the most useful vehicle for acquiring the skills necessary for plugging into the world market. The concern has been to prepare a workforce which is flexible and adaptable to meet the demands of the global economy.

5 Raising standards of living and improving the quality of life are prime deliverables. At the same time, the countries in the region are also keenly aware of the need to preserve their national and cultural identities. For that reason, as I mentioned a few moments ago, there is in some quarters a strong inclination to reduce the influence of foreign languages and to attach importance to the vernacular. Each country will have to make its own decision. There are no easy solutions. Perhaps this seminar could provide some insights on this issue for policy makers to consider.

6 While all of us would agree that there are certain fundamental values that a society must espouse as its own, we also need to come to terms with the world we live in today. Today, the speed of developments in all spheres of human endeavour is tremendous. We all need the skills to handle new information and new technology, and be quick to respond to changes. Being multicultural and multilingual societies, we have a natural asset in our diversity which will add richness and bountiful creativity to the response that we make to modern society. While we do not expect any dramatic solutions to the problems that face us, it is my hope that this seminar will examine the issues in greater depth. I am therefore very pleased that SEAMEO RELC has chosen language curriculum and instruction as the theme for this seminar.

7 *(Announcement of the results of the SEAMEO Regional Schools Internet Project.)*

I would also like to congratulate SEAMEO Regional Language Centre on having successfully completed 2 years of coordinating an internet project linking schools in the SEAMEO region. Last year the participating schools developed magazines showcasing sports activities in their own countries in SEAMEO. For the first time these participating schools vied for 2 prizes for:

- i) The country which developed the best magazine in the project, and
- ii) The country which provided the best sustained effort in the project.

Each prize is a voucher for S\$4,000 to purchase 2 sets of computers for the

winning schools. I am pleased to announce that the country that won the best magazine is Indonesia. I am also equally pleased to announce that the country that won the best prize for sustained effort is Brunei Darussalam. I wish to extend my heartiest congratulations to the winners and appreciation to the other participating schools. Through the internet our world has become smaller and our schools have crossed physical barriers to become members of the global village.

8 On that note, I am happy to declare the Seminar open.

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