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Subject: [EMBARGOED] Speech by Mr Chan Soo Sen, 13 May 2000, 2.45 pm

Singapore Government

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**SPEECH BY MR CHAN SOO SEN, PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY
(PRIME MINISTER' S OFFICE & MINISTRY OF HEALTH), AT THE
SANA SYMPOSIUM: DRUG ABUSE – MEETING THE CHALLENGES
IN THE MILLENNIUM ON SATURDAY, 13 MAY 2000 AT 2.45 PM AT
HOTEL GRAND COPTHORNE WATERFRONT, GRAND
BALLROOM (LEVEL 4), 392 HAVELOCK ROAD**

Dr Loo Choon Yong,
President, Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am very happy to be here with you at the opening of this Symposium. I would first like to congratulate SANA for organising this Symposium. I would also like to compliment SANA for your good work in rehabilitating drug abusers. Your contributions have been critical in helping to curb the problem of drug abuse in Singapore.

2 We, in Singapore, adopt very tough and severe enforcement measures against drug abusers and traffickers. We have also been very diligent in preventive education. Our drug abuse situation is under control. However, we still face the challenge of rehabilitating former drug abusers, so as to help them return to the society, and to stay away from drugs.

3 This sounds easy enough, since a drug addict who has undergone effective rehabilitation will no longer have a physiological need to return to drugs. However, we still have a national relapse rate of 51.8% despite the stringent measures adopted, and with the drug abusers knowing very well the consequences of relapsing.

4 I feel that a key reason for high relapse rate is social. Let's adopt the viewpoint of a former drug abuser, and imagine I am one. I have to undergo "cold turkey" treatment and drug rehabilitation. I have been weaned off drugs by the time I leave the DRC. So I left the DRC happily, and was determined to return to society. But when I reach home, I find my family not wanting to accept me. Even if some family members still love me, others ostracise me. I feel I have inconvenienced those who still love me. Then I try to look for a job, and find that many employers not willing to employ me. I look for my friends, and find that, except for the fellow drug abusers, most of them shun me. While I want to return, the society does not seem to want me. They seem to doubt my sincerity, and seem to be telling me "Once a drug addict, always a drug addict" .

5 Imagine leaving DRC to a life without friends, and without social support. My girlfriend or wife leaves me. My family deserts me. My working colleagues despise me. My previous and potential employers refuse to employ me. No man is an island. I do need friends. But where do I find them? If only my old drug addicts understand and accept me, sooner or later I would go back to them again. As you know, I do not have a strong will to start with, which is why I succumbed to drug addiction in the first place. If I rejoin my old addict friends, I will relapse soon enough. All the rehabilitative efforts would all have been wasted, and I will have to start all over again.

6 This is where SANA have played an important and critical role in rehabilitating former drug abusers. Your staff and volunteers give me the most important gift: acceptance. You become my friends to provide solace, comfort and support. You give me a second chance, and new opportunities. Your support makes me less prone to returning to their old circle of addict friends.

Your support gives encouragement and inspiration to my family, and other sectors of the society, to also accept me and give me a second chance. You have given your time and your effort, but you have given to the former drug abusers new lives and new hope.

7 I would therefore like to thank SANA for your many years of good work in integrating former drug abusers back into the society. Over the years, many innovative programmes were introduced. I am very happy to note that SANA has a PAL programme targeted at Out-of-schools youths to prevent them from abusing drugs. Out-of-school youths are the most vulnerable among our youths, forming 88.5% of new drug addicts each year. SANA could work with the CDCs. Through their grassroots network, you can reach out to these youths, as well as to recruit more volunteers. By providing the ‘good peers’ , we can prevent the youths from abusing drugs.

8 One of the top challenges is to continue to find good volunteers with a spirit of acceptance and commitment, in order to help former abusers return to the society. I would like to salute the many volunteers who are here today. Your contribution towards solving drug abuse problems in Singapore over the years have been tremendous. Your work makes a difference to the life of a fellow member of the society.

9 On this note, I wish you a successful and fruitful Symposium. Let’ s strive for a drug free Singapore.

Thank you.

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