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SPEECH BY PRESIDENT C V DEVAN NAIR  
AT THE OPENING OF THE SAFRA BUKIT MERAH CLUB HOUSE  
ON WEDNESDAY, 26 SEPTEMBER 1984 AT 8.00 PM

Twenty five years ago, fourteen decades of British colonial rule came to an end, and the people of Singapore saw a fully elected Parliament and Government. There were problems galore - social, political, employment, education, housing, health and other problems. Our headaches were compounded by the discovery that the Singapore Treasury was not merely empty. We had, in fact, inherited a \$14 million deficit, and the worst thing in the world to inherit is a deficit.

There was a Singapore, but hardly any Singaporeans as yet. There were only Chinese, Malays and Indians, all living in separate, almost water-tight cultural compartments, and pulled in different directions by communal and racialist appeals. It provided a fertile breeding ground for the three Cs - communists, communalists and crooks. London, Kuala Lumpur and Washington reverberated with dire prognostications of doom and disaster. We proved the prophets wrong.

Today it is a radically different scenario. At the end of May 1984, our official foreign reserves amounted to \$20.5 billion. There is full employment. Incomes are several times higher. So are our savings. All this and more - the new townships, industrial estates, schools, hospitals, tertiary institutions, the SAF, the

Changi Airport, SIA, the PSA, the most modern telecommunications system in this part of the world, the expressways, soon an MRT, and thriving statutory boards in many areas of public endeavour - all within a time span of 25 years. You may be assured that no supernatural intervention was involved.

Mercifully for Singapore, the electorate chose wisely. Those in charge were not woolly-headed romantic or ideological phrase-mongers. Neither were they quack medicine men who had promised miracle cures to a fickle and all too gullible electorate. The dung-heaps which litter several areas of the Third World today are the aberrant miscreations of such men.

Those elected to take charge of Singapore got their basics right. Otherwise we would have been another squalid Third World dung-heap, with the inevitable blue-bottles buzzing over the putrid pile.

The basics were straightforward. First, assemble men and women of talent, integrity, character and commitment in all areas of public life. Ensure high standards of public morality. Eliminate incompetence. But the most impressive diamond hidden in the dung-heap that was Singapore 25 years ago, was the populace. A hard-working people responded to the honesty, integrity and intelligence of the elected leaders of government.

With increasing social and political stability came productive jobs-creating investments from overseas. Bankers, merchants, industrialists, investors of all kinds, trade unionists and people in all strata of life came to appreciate that the elected leaders of Singapore were more interested in being right than in courting cheap and transient popularity.

Singaporeans have now a stake in the continuing stability, progress and prosperity of the Republic. The generality of Singaporeans are home-owners or expecting to come into possession of their own homes. And they do not have long to wait either. It is internationally acknowledged that Singapore has about the most successful housing programme in the world. If you do not have a stake in your own country, there is clearly no incentive for you to bother about its defence. One cannot defend what one does not possess.

Individually we have stakes in Singapore. Collectively, we are the owners of impressive billions in our reserves, a safe and secure buffer against possible, and indeed probable, future shocks. We therefore take great care not to be prodigal with the inheritance of our people. For it would be abysmal folly to squander our reserves, or to eat into our capital. We also make sure not to spend money which we do not have, or do not earn.

There are societies which go on short-lived binges, by dipping their hands into public reserves and by mortgaging the future of unborn generations. But binges are of the moment, for there is always the dreadful morning after the night before. And if you continue to insist on binges, you eventually develop fatal cirrhosis of the liver. Societies and nations also suffer from punished livers, and are subject to creeping social arterio-sclerosis which clog up the circulatory system of the body politic. Which is why so much emphasis is placed in Singapore on constant self-regeneration.

Because we have so much to protect and defend, as individual citizens and as a nation, we have built a citizens' defence force. History provides ample testimony that an unarmed and unprepared people, devoid of military skills and technology, only encourage predatory appetites in others.

The knowledge that your dwelling is equipped with burglar alarms and other security devices will deter burglars. By the same token, the knowledge that your nation has a sophisticated early-warning system, a well-trained army, modern weaponry, and formidable fire-power, will also deter would-be aggressors. And it would be a very foolish aggressor indeed, who discounts the existence of immediately mobilisable resources, in terms of a well-trained, fit and militarily updated citizens' army of reservists. The general recognition that Singapore would clearly prove a highly indigestible morsel for an aggressor to swallow is the best deterrence against aggression.

Hence the constant emphasis on total security, total defence, and total preparedness. Our friends respect us because of this. And those who do not wish us well nonetheless refrain from flexing their muscles in our faces.

SAFRA is therefore crucial, because our reservists are crucial. As immediately mobilisable resources in times of national danger, they need to keep themselves well-trained, muscular and fit. Dyspeptic reservists, with flabby muscles and rusty military skills and know-how, will make Singapore a tempting prey for predators.

The social and economic progress we have made may well have lulled some Singaporeans into a sense of complacency. But those who keep themselves updated on world political and economic developments appreciate the brutal truth that we live in a dangerous and unpredictable world. The alternative to national unity, stability, and to economic and military preparedness, is swift regression to a landscape of disaster. Lebanon, Kampuchea, South Vietnam a few years ago, and other areas in South Asia, Africa and Latin America provide vivid illustrations of

the tragic disenchantments that are bound to follow upon national disunity, instability, and flabby soft-headedness. Singapore and our ASEAN partners accept the brute fact that we do not live in a paradisaal region, nor even next door to any paradise. A number of social and political infernos rage and crackle, burn and kill, not far from our own serener shores.

I was a young man when the much-touted "impregnable" British fortress of Singapore collapsed like a house of cards in a matter of days, during the Second World War. British guns faced the wrong way, while the people themselves were totally unprepared - psychologically, economically and militarily. Result: three and a half years of terror, rapine, massacre and deprivation, accompanied by moral, material and spiritual degradation. The present generation of Singaporeans would do well by themselves to do everything to ensure that they never have to undergo similar experiences, because of any want of preparedness on their part.

I have endeavoured to paint the back-drop against which it will be possible for Singaporeans to appreciate the unassailable rationale for the substantial Government commitments to SAFRA.

\$1.8 million was spent on the first club house at Toa Payoh in 1975. \$9 million has been spent on the second SAFRA Bukit Merah Club House. Another \$10 million will be spent on the third club house to be built in Tampines, two years from now.

We can afford this because of healthy GNP growth generated by a vibrant economy. The opportunity cost of the investments in SAFRA projects is high. The funds could have been put to productive use in other areas, whether economic or social. Why then do we inject substantial financial resources in club houses for reservists? There are good reasons. Let me explain.

The task of transforming loyal citizens into good citizen-soldiers is an arduous one. But it is gratifying that Singaporeans today accept the fact that we alone have to defend ourselves; that soldiering is a vitally important part of our lives.

In some societies, the armed forces are a symbol of oppression. In others, they are objects of derision; in some adulation. In many countries, the profession of arms is a career on the low end of the social scale. We are more fortunate in Singapore.

We are not a militaristic nation. The people and the armed forces belong to each other. The SAF is not made up of other people's sons; for many of us, it is our own flesh and blood. Our goal is therefore to become a nation in which the people and their armed forces are part of one total defence structure.

Forging a nation with this character is not an easy matter. It requires everybody's support. It requires dedicated effort, lots of persuasion and sacrifices. But the job must be done. SAFRA, through its various channels, can help do it. It means going beyond catering to the physical well-being of reservists. It is not just the squash and badminton courts, the gymnasium or the swimming pool, that are of sole concern. It is the emphasis on the whole person - his mind, his values.

In the past decade, SAFRA has indeed done well in providing facilities for the social, recreational and physical fitness needs of individual reservists. MINDEF tells me that the time has now come for SAFRA to move away from catering to individual reservists like any other club or association. I share MINDEF's thinking that SAFRA must increasingly place emphasis on activities and programmes aimed at encouraging reservists from the same reserve unit

or battalion to come together frequently. It is imperative that our reservists frequently interact with their buddies and comrades and build up strong bonds of friendship and trust to build up unit cohesion. In times of crises or war they will be teaming up as buddies to fight the common enemy. They should not be fighting like strangers next to one another. Their lives and the security of our country will depend on the degree of cohesion within our fighting units. This is absolutely critical. Team spirit and camaraderie will enable our men to fight better, with valour and determination. It is an essential ingredient in determining whether we can defend ourselves, our families and our homes, besides other factors like weaponry, fire-power and tactics.

I understand that SAFRA today has the facilities and the resources to assist reservist commanders in their efforts to build up unit cohesion and esprit de corps among their men. As a start, SAFRA's facilities could be made available for priority booking by groups of reservists from the same unit at discounted rates. This will encourage reservists to get together, and know one another outside the camp.

SAFRA should also encourage reservists to read and keep themselves informed of current events and developments - local, regional and international. They influence and help to determine our thinking and policies. Knowledge of these matters will help reservists to appreciate and understand the rationale of the policies we pursue as a nation.

In your efforts to be the bridge between the SAF and reservists you must bear in mind always your role in forging our reservists into a motivated, committed and cohesive fighting force. This above all is the most important mission of SAFRA, one in which you must not fail. With intelligent planning, skill in execution, and fire in your bellies, you will not fail. - - - - @@@@