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SPEECH BY MR FONG SIP CHEE, SENIOR PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY (LABOUR)
AT THE OPENING OF THE SEMINAR ON "PROFESSIONALISM IN SAFETY"
ORGANISED BY THE SINGAPORE INSTITUTION OF SAFETY OFFICERS AT
THE GOODWOOD PARK HOTEL, CARLTON HALL ON 24 MARCH '79 AT 9.00 A.M.

This first seminar organised by the Singapore Institution of Safety Officers (SISO) bears special significance towards workers' safety management in Singapore. I had the privilege of being consulted when your Institution was being formed in 1975. I thought it would be a good idea to group together Safety Personnel in Singapore for the common objective of ensuring a better working condition for our workers particularly in the matter of safety and health.

The theme adopted for this Seminar "Professionalism in Safety" has been the subject of many discussions between myself and the many Safety Personnel whom I come into contact with, in particular, members of your Committee. They know my feelings and my insistence on professionalism in this new discipline. We are in complete agreement.

Two years before the inception of SISO, the Ministry of Labour also initiated action to establish the Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH). I am pleased to inform the Seminar that the Institute has been approved and steps are now being taken to drafting the legislation to bring about its existence as quickly as possible. The Institute has taken as many years to come about as the first Seminar organised by the SISO. In the meanwhile, not a few nasty accidents have taken place.

Even at the time of the inception of your Organisation, the Ministry of Labour had invested a great deal of work in building up the infrastructure in industrial safety and health management. They are in particular:

- (1) revision of the Factories Act for the upgrading

- of standards of safety and health;
- (2) corresponding updating of the Act's subsidiary legislation;
 - (3) the encouragement for the adoption of Codes of Practice for the various industries;
 - (4) educational activities including publications, campaigns, talks and workshop discussions;
 - (5) technical coverage in the form of training courses in the various aspects of safety and health, handling of equipment and machineries including even industrial first aid; and
 - (6) ad hoc consultancy service.

The activities I mentioned appear to be all embracing. However, 2 aspects we have not been able to make much headway is that the moral commitment of the employers on the one hand and the human failings of the workers on the other. We all recognise that it is impossible to reach each and everyone of the hundreds of thousands of workers as individuals, each with their own prejudice, levels of education, habits, attitudes and receptibility. The only alternative is to evolve different systems to meet the situation and environment peculiar to individual industries.

For these two purposes, the Safety Officers are the front-line enforcement and education personnel. The mere enforcement by the limited manpower of the Factory Inspectorate will not be adequate and

Safety Officers are charged with the establishment of a safety administration in factories to look after the problems at the plant level.

To achieve this, the Ministry introduced legislation for Safety Officers and Safety Committees in selected factories. The qualifications, training and duties of Safety Officers have been defined. Steps have also been taken to monitor the Safety Officers' performance through the monthly hazard reports which they are required to submit to the employers. The report is essentially a review of the task accomplished in the previous month and the work plan for the current month. An important feature is that the report draws the attention of the employers to any remedial measures which must be taken to rectify the hazardous work situation in the plant.

You know that I hold very strong views that you must zealously guard your professionalism and ensure that charlatan should not be permitted in your midst. On the other hand, few, if any, perhaps one or two, enjoy the privilege or rather the right to exercise their powers as mandatory advice with full backing from the employers.

I note that two ingredients crucial to the effective discharge of the role of Safety Officers are reflected in the three topics chosen for the Seminar viz Safety - a top management function, the making of a Safety Personnel and a code of ethics for the profession.

Let me first touch on the safety and top management. Safety Officers have to work in harmony with their dual functions. On the one hand they are answerable to the State for their responsibilities towards safety and health of their factories. On the other, they

are employees of their factories and must also take into account the interest of their employers. We have still not arrived at the happy situation where employers are all morally committed towards the safety and health of their employees and prepared to integrate safety into their administration and production. There is no doubt that the work of Safety Officers is very much easier if the top management provide them with the support, which if forthcoming, line managers will heed the advice of the Safety Officers, and workers will follow the safety procedures laid down by the Safety Adviser or risk the danger of disciplinary action.

Where this support is absent, the task of the Safety Officers is a difficult one. Whatever may be the case, the Safety Officer must at all times discharge his responsibility towards safety and health as provided in the legislation. He must continue to make his recommendations for improvements to safety and health. The management must bear the responsibility of consequences if it chooses to ignore the advice of its Safety Officer. In this regard, I am pleased to note that a person no less than the President of the Singapore Employers Federation is scheduled to speak to you on the important subject of top management's involvement in safety.

Whilst the employers' commitment is not that evident although I have been informed that the SMA is now more positive in its attitude towards safety and health of the workers, I am happy to note that charges of failure or dereliction of duties of Safety Personnel have been few.

The Safety Officer must be able to provide sound and practical advice on safety and health measures if he is to win the support of

top management and the respect of line managers and workers. Many Safety Officers have undergone the Safety Officers' Training Course. Experience will come with time. I need not stress that it is imperative for Safety Officers to keep abreast of developments in safety and health, especially those affecting the industry they work in. Indeed one of SISO's objectives is the promotion of technical knowledge of Safety Officers. SISO should plan to function more actively as a clearing house for occupational safety and health information. It should also promote exchange of experience among Safety Officers. Common problems and difficulties should be discussed. The Ministry will be only too pleased and look forward to receiving recommendations from you.

Mere technical knowledge however will not suffice. The Safety Officer is today someone who should no longer be preoccupied with the task of hazards spotting. Experience has taught us that elimination of direct causes of an accident need not necessarily prevent the recurrence of similar accidents in future. We have found in many cases that accidents are symptoms of failures in the management system. The solution lies not only in eliminating direct causes but also rectifying the lapses in the management system. Hence, the task of Safety Officer must not only be a mere "hazard spotter and fixer" but also a manager of safety. A Safety Officer will, therefore, need to be trained in management. He will need to have the skills to run his safety department, develop the necessary information feedback system and arrange for the training of his supporting safety staff. He will have to devise and implement training programmes for workers in the factory. SISO might want to look into how to further the managerial knowledge and skills of their members as they relate to

safety and health.

What I have said may make me stand suspect of trying to make a superman out of a Safety Officer. This is not the case, of course. These are knowledge and qualities humanly possible to acquire. I mention them with ^{the} hope to enlighten the employers on the onerous task of a Safety Officer and to whom absolute support must be given.

To succeed in controlling industrial accidents and diseases, we need the concert efforts of all concerned whether it is the Government, management, Safety Officers, unions and workers. Success will bring with it the satisfaction that we have done our best to eliminate the unnecessary deaths and maiming of our workers and the consequent pain and suffering to the affected families. Safety Officers are our front-line personnel in our battle against industrial accidents and diseases. I am confident they will continue to play their part in our collective efforts to reduce the number of accidents and diseases in our factories.

Finally, I have great pleasure in declaring open the Seminar and wish it fruitful deliberations. And may I leave with the hope that the employers will respond with a seminar on how they will accept the professional advice of Safety Officers and support them in their discharge of their duties.