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**SPEECH BY MR GOH CHOK TONG, FIRST DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER
AND MINISTER FOR DEFENCE, AT THE COMMUNITY CHEST OF
SINGAPORE AT THE HYATT REGENCY SINGAPORE, CRYSTAL BALLROOM,
ON SATURDAY, 30 JULY 1988 AT 11.30 AM**

ARE WE A COMPASSIONATE SOCIETY?

I was visibly impressed, and touched, by the happy, smiling faces of the concert participants a few moments ago. Their actions reveal the determination of those who, despite their physical handicaps, want to lead full, productive and better lives. They remind us of the importance of charitable organisations and their fund-raising activities. They also remind us of the valuable time given by volunteer workers who help the disabled to lead as normal a life as possible.

What is a Compassionate Society

We often hear people saying Singaporeans are too materialistic, that we are busily pursuing wealth and success in our careers to the extent that we neglect the less fortunate members of society. Is this true? Are we a society without a heart? Are we a society without compassion? What is a compassionate society anyway? I posed this question to the Ministry of Community Development. The Ministry is tasked with the job of looking after welfare in particular, welfare of the less fortunate. I got the following answer:

"A compassionate society is one where its members generally show care and concern for one another and willingness to help the less fortunate members". Unquote.

A Compassionate Government Makes Concessions

What Ministry of Community Development means is that fortunate people should accommodate the less fortunate so that they can have a decent chance of leading a decent life. How? As a general principle, we cannot apply to the less fortunate the rules of normal living. The less fortunate members of society are handicapped by either adverse family circumstances or physical and/or mental abnormalities. It would be unfair to apply the ordinary rules of normal living to them. For example, we cannot apply the rule of competition to them. Concessions have to be made. The extent to which a society is prepared to make such concessions will determine how compassionate it is. Have we made such concessions? We have. We have put aside certain jobs for the disabled. If we were ruthless and uncompassionate, we would do away with lift attendants in Government offices. But we have not. We reserve them for the disabled. We provide homes for the destitute. We give cash grants to the poor. Each year, we also write off thousands of Government hospital bills incurred by those who could not afford to pay. Of course, we ask them to pay up in the first place. But if investigations show that they genuinely cannot afford to pay, we waive the bills. We allow the poorer Singaporeans to make lower downpayment in their application for HDB flats. They too aspire to home-ownership.

Still, should we not do more for the less fortunate? We should, but only to the extent that we do not erode competitive spirit of society for the able-bodied. This will happen if concessions become so extensive that even those who do not belong to the category of the less fortunate can take advantage of the concessions. Then we will become a welfare state. This we cannot allow.

Dominant Role of Private Individuals and Organisations

Beyond concessions, the Government should confine its role to providing the infrastructure and the climate conducive for private organisations and individuals to play a role.

Volunteers

Private individuals can contribute in two ways, namely, volunteer to do welfare work or contribute generously to fund-raising efforts. Volunteers and funds are equally important. Volunteers form the backbone of voluntary welfare organisations. With more volunteers, more services can be provided to a wider range of the less fortunate.

Funds

The same is true of funds. Adequate funding is needed to run voluntary welfare organisations effectively. More funds will enable these organisations to expand and improve their services for the needy. It is in this respect that fund-raising organisations like the Community Chest are so important. Over the years, the amount of funds raised by the Community Chest has increased significantly, from \$8 million in 1984 to \$13 million in 1987. Singaporeans are becoming more generous in donating to charity. It is a good sign. Those who cannot spare their time in voluntary welfare service can donate money generously. The number of beneficiaries of the Community Chest has gone up three-fold in the same period, from 22,000 to 63,000.

The total expenditure of providing basic welfare services by 67 voluntary welfare organisations was about \$30 million in 1986. This figure will rise to about \$48 million in five years' time, an increase of 60 per cent. This places a heavy burden on organisations like the Community Chest. Charity Sweep '88 will raise over \$2 million. Raising this amount in eight weeks is a big job. All of us can make it easier with our wholehearted support.

Compassion - A Hallmark of Civilised Society

I started off by asking whether we are a compassionate society. From my brief survey, I think that we are, both as a society and as private individuals. Prospects of a more compassionate society are encouraging. As we become a more affluent society, we will have more time and resources to spare for the less fortunate. We are already preparing to do more for them. We can expect some good recommendations from the Advisory Councils on the Aged, Disabled, and Family and Community Life. As we strive towards our goal of a matured and cultivated society, we must not neglect the disadvantaged groups. How civilised we are as a society depends on how well we treat the weakest members of our society. We must treat them well - with care, concern and compassion. Every Singaporean has a place in Singapore.

It now gives me great pleasure to launch Charity Sweep '88.
