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SPEECH BY THE MINISTER OF DEFENCE, MR HOWE YOON CHONG, AT THE
OPENING OF THE SINGAPORE CHANGI AIRPORT ON TUESDAY,
29 DECEMBER 1981 AT 3.30 PM

My colleague, Mr Ong Teng Cheong, has been generous in his praise of my contribution to the birth of this magnificent airport. It is true that I was the Chairman of the Special Committee on Airport Development, which recommended strongly that Changi should be developed into a modern airport worthy of Singapore and that the plans for the second runway and for expansion of Paya Lebar should be scrapped.

But looking back, the public service appointments I then held (Permanent Secretary, PMO; Chairman, PSA; and Head of Civil Service) were such that what I did was purely in the normal course of duty. The Special Committee had to come forth with its recommendations in three months and I saw to it that this was done. Subsequently the Government accepted the recommendations. Six years of relentless toil later, through sheer hard work and well coordinated effort the many teams of professional and technical staff, engineers and architects, consultants and experts, contractors and sub-contractors, and thousands of construction workers completed Phase I of the new airport in record time. On 1 July 1981 Changi replaced Paya Lebar.

I thank the Minister for Communications for doing me the great honour of inviting me to officiate at this ceremony. I am delighted to join him in thanking all those who worked on this project.

The people of Singapore owe these thousands of men and women a debt of gratitude. To them must go all the glory and praise. We cannot mention everyone of them, there are simply too many. But no one will grudge my identifying a few special individuals or groups like (i) Mr Sim Kee Boon (Head of the Civil Service and PS (Communications)) for outstanding leadership and indefatigable efforts in the coordination of many different

interests and disciplines so that they pulled together and in the same direction for very tight schedules to be maintained; (ii) Mr Yap Neng Chew, Mr Goh Keng Chew, and Mr Chua Hua Meng of the PWD team who bore the main brunt of the work and who were responsible for the planning, design, and implementation that transformed what was wilderness into this modern airport; (iii) Mr A Vijiaratnam, then Director of Engineering Services and his PSA team for expeditious reclamation work; (iv) Mr Tan Kwang Hung and officers of the DCA for civil aviation and technical inputs.

The bulk of the Special Committee's inquiries and investigations were carried out by two bright young officers: Mr Lim Hock San, then my assistant at PSA, who did most of the spade work, and Mr Pek Hock Thiam, then Principal Assistant Secretary (Communications), who served as Secretary to the Committee. Between them they combed through voluminous reports of earlier consultants, analysed statistics, and tabulated fresh data. Their energetic efforts enabled the Report to be completed on time. I am proud of both of them.

Today the control and management functions of Changi Airport including the Administration of all Civil Aviation Department matters are vested in a team of well qualified and enthusiastic young technocrats led by Mr Lim Hock San, the Director of Civil Aviation. The Special Committee's recommendations have resulted not only in this Airport, but also in an excellent team to deal with management, further development, and all airport construction, engineering, and technical matters. The administration of the Airport has undoubtedly been entrusted to experienced and capable hands.

I have often been asked how was it possible for the recommendations of the Special Committee to be accepted so quickly and how Singapore could

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justify such a large airport. The reasons become clear when the relevant facts are set out in proper perspective. Changi Airport became a reality because further extension of Paya Lebar starting with the second runway had to be reviewed in the aftermath of the oil crisis of October 1973 and because the PSA had ready plans to reclaim large tracks of land at Changi for an airport and seaport complex.

Few people have stopped to ponder over the consequences of constructing the second runway and the long term implications of expanding Paya Lebar Airport. Land clearance, resettlement, air and noise pollution were only some of the complicated and messy problems. The work could not be completed before 1984.

But even with the second runway and the planned extensions, Paya Lebar would be far from ideal. By 1984 the aircraft and passenger traffic could have increased to levels beyond what these additions and extensions would accommodate. Further expansion would be almost impossible. The pressures would still remain.

The Prime Minister was not satisfied with the decision to build the second runway. His concern was wide-ranging. It bothered him that the increasing noise and air pollution would irritate more and more people at both ends of two runways and in the areas surrounding the expanded airport. The traffic congestion already bad on the approach roads to the airport would be further aggravated. The resettlement of thousands of families would cause much suffering and hardship. We would be accumulating problems for the future and in the long run Paya Lebar Airport could even damage our position as an important communications centre.

The first oil crisis of October 1973 with its five-fold increase in fuel costs brought about an abrupt halt to the rapid growth of passenger traffic. Paya Lebar's annual growth of 25 per cent over the years 1968 to 1973 petered out and the passenger traffic increase for 1974 over 1973 was only 9 per cent. With the threat of further increase in the oil price, the projections for 1975 and beyond were less intimidating. The Government remained fully confident that eventually aircraft and passenger traffic through Singapore must continue to increase. We have now the opportunity to review our airport problems in a dispassionate manner and to investigate alternative solutions. The Special Committee on Airport

Development was set up to study these problems in January 1975 and to come forward with recommendations.

PSA officers were the staunchest proponents of Changi for an airport development. They had followed with increasing concern the mounting problems that confronted Paya Lebar. Their own experience (in the conversion from conventional to container wharf facilities) led them to conclude that Paya Lebar, planned and constructed in the early 1950's for the propeller age, was quite obsolete, inappropriately located, restricted in expansion possibilities and unlikely ever to be adequate to cope with demands of modern air travel and the rapid advances in civil aviation technology. However much we tried, the inadequacies and deficiencies could not be satisfactorily remedied. The best alternative would be to build a totally new airport to serve the needs of the jet age. PSA could not interfere with the functions of other authorities. The best it could do was to provide a fall back position and await the opportunity to be called upon to assist. Hence its reclamation plans for the seaport and airport complex made provision for a huge airport many times the size of Paya Lebar.

The proponents of Changi Airport were convinced that Singapore must make the best use of its strategic location. To obtain maximum advantage its airport must be the best and most efficient that human ingenuity and our own resources can provide. To be worthy of Singapore our international airport must be well designed, efficiently managed and operated, flexible, and well able to adjust to rapid advances in aviation technology. It must be properly planned with land reserved for future expansion.

PSA had planned to reclaim 3440 hectares (8500 acres) for its airport/seaport complex. Together with the RSAF Changi Airbase, some HDB reclaimed land, and some acquired private lands, a sizeable 4047 hectares (10,000 acres) could be assembled. In the event only 707 hectares (1700 acres) were reclaimed for Changi Airport due to time and money constraints. The HDB land and Changi RSAF Airbase and some private lands that were more readily available were taken over to constitute the 1663 hectares (4103 acres) necessary for Changi Airport. Paya Lebar occupied only 285 hectares (704 acres), about one-sixth the size of Changi. The cost for Changi I and II was then estimated to be \$1241 million; and the total cost of the second runway and extensions to Paya Lebar was well in excess of \$800 million.

Changi Airport was therefore very much of a bargain. This and the fact that Changi could be completed faster, would have less noise and air pollution and upset few people with resettlement, was within easy expressway communications with the city, and had vast land reserves for future expansion made it the obvious choice. The present planned capacity of 30 million passengers per annum using two runways could be doubled to 60 million passengers and three or four runways without much difficulty. The cost might be higher but the more important and crucial factor is land.

Singapore is right in the heart of ASEAN, the fastest growing economic grouping in the world. The potentials for further expansion of trade, industry, tourism, banking, and finance are enormous. For as long as wide-bodied jets continue to be used, Changi Airport will attract more aircraft and passenger traffic and more air cargo.

The real growth is yet to come. Historically the Mediterranean (the sea of the past), and the Atlantic (the sea of the present) took centuries to develop due to slow transportation provided by sailing ships and steamers. Today's wide-bodied jets promise much faster development of the Pacific Ocean (the so called "sea of the future"). The vast distances separating the littoral states have been shrunk to manageable proportions in terms of travel time. With lower airfares and increased disposable incomes or both, the millions of people in these states could be brought closer together or could have more contacts with other parts of the world. The loop route encircling the vast ocean and linking the major cities on the Pacific Rim should by now have been well developed. The delay is probably due to the oil crisis and the economic turmoil that followed.

For the present, apart from the Japanese the majority of the peoples of Asia and South America living on the shores of the Pacific have yet to attain the affluence to have sufficient disposable incomes to travel for leisure. Every government strives to raise the incomes and living standards of its people. As they meet with success there will be further intensification of the established trunk routes through Singapore and the rapid development of the loop route. Though for the moment the air travel industry is experiencing difficulties, nevertheless it will only be a matter of time before passenger traffic growth gathers momentum. An air

travel explosion can occur when these Asian and South American countries solve their energy problems and achieve greater economic progress.

Changi Airport is our major investment to exploit our geographic location. Singapore must be prepared and ready to seize every opportunity that comes its way. Whether we have been extravagant in investing in an airport of this size and level of sophistication is a question worthy of a rhetorical rejoinder. Can Singapore ever afford not to have such an airport?
