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SPEECH BY THE MINISTER FOR CULTURE AND SCIENCE
& TECHNOLOGY, MR JEK YEUN THONG, AT THE OPENING
OF THE 3RD CONGRESS OF THE SINGAPORE NATIONAL
ACADEMY OF SCIENCE ON THURSDAY 14 JUL 77 AT 9.45 AM
AT THE REGIONAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE CENTRE

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I am pleased to have been invited to address this august gathering of scientists and to declare open the 3rd Congress of the Singapore National Academy of Science. The theme chosen by you for your Congress - the Role of Research and Development in National Progress - is a timely one as it brings to the attention of the scientists, technologists, economists and sociologists as well as the administrators and the general public the major part Research and Development plays in promoting the economic and social development of a nation.

The significant achievements in material progress in the last 100 years of civilisation in a wide range of fields covering agriculture, industry, transport and communications, health and education have resulted in substantial improvements in the living standards of people the world over. This has been made possible mainly by improvements in science and technology through research and development. Any nation at any level of development wanting to achieve progress can ill-afford to neglect this.

There is a general belief that there is a close relationship between expenditure on Research and Development and the growth rate of the national economy. This, however, is not one of a simple correlation. Experience has shown that some countries spent a great deal of money on Research Development without achieving a commensurate increase on economic growth while other countries spending much less have had high growth rates. It is obvious that the amount spent on research and development in itself is not the critical factor. Of greater importance is the commitment of such expenditure on projects orientated towards economic development and our ability to make use of the results to generate economic growth.

Advanced countries tend to spend on an average about 2 - 3% of their gross national product on Research and Development while for most developing countries the average is in the region of 0.2%. A significant proportion of the research funds in developed countries, however, is spent on areas geared towards nuclear, space and military research aimed at improving their power and status. If some of these funds were diverted to research in more mundane areas relevant to the problems facing developing countries this would help to accelerate their growth and development.

The future progress of developing countries like Singapore with limited resources of trained manpower and finance will depend greatly on our capacity to derive benefits from the rapid advancements made in science and technology. The pace of development can be increased greatly by improvements in the quality of our human resources and the introduction of improved technology, either by importation or by indigenous development, leading to the discovery of new processes and products and the opening up of new markets. It is in our interest not to exhaust our limited resources on research in prestigious projects or to blindly follow trends set by the global scientific community.

Research institutes and organisations such as the Singapore National Academy of Science have a crucial role to perform in promoting and developing research in the right direction. You can help to identify priority areas and assist in channelling our efforts in applied research in areas which can make a positive contribution to our social and economic development. Research activities should be directed to the upgrading of local technology with optimum utilisation of our manpower resources and the improvement of the quality of housing and environment as well as general living standards. Opportunities should be made available for frequent consultations and discussions and for the pooling of effort and resources so as to conserve resources and avoid duplication of effort.

A reference to the programme of activities and papers to be considered in your deliberations at the Third Congress shows that you have a ready appreciation of the problem areas of developing nations. I am sure the participants will have fruitful discussions and the findings of this Congress will make a positive contribution towards an upsurge of research activity orientated to national progress. Your active participation in the various activities the organising committee has planned for you for the next three days should also bring about a closer co-operation among the scientific community of the countries represented at this Congress. It is now my pleasure to extend to all the delegates a warm welcome and pleasant stay in our country and to declare open the Congress.