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SPEECH BY DR LEE BOON YANG, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE (NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND HOME AFFAIRS), AT THE OPENING OF THE SEMINAR ON FIRE SAFETY IN HOTELS AT THE YORK HOTEL ON MONDAY, 6 MARCH 1989 AT 9 AM

Some of you may recall the Bukit Ho Swee fire in May 1961 which destroyed several thousand attap houses and made thousands of people homeless. An area of about 60 hectares was totally gutted. The Director of Fire Service told me that it was one of his most challenging and memorable fires. The entire Fire Service was mobilised. Even fire-fighting units of the British Armed Forces, then stationed in Singapore, were activated to contain the fire. That happened 28 years ago.

Today, there are hardly any squatter colonies left. But the risk of a major fire cannot be ruled out. Fire safety is a continuous battle and today's seminar will help to focus attention on the important aspect of fire safety in high-rise hotels.

With rapid urbanisation and industrialisation, the threat of fire has taken on new forms. There are now more than 350 high-rise commercial buildings and over 3,500 high-rise apartment buildings in Singapore. In our dense urban environment, any fire in a high-rise building may spread rapidly engulfing the whole building if we fail to take the right precautions. We must always be alert to such dangers.

The real challenge is to reduce the chances of a fire occuring in the first place. This is a formidable challenge. New forms of industry and the growing trend towards larger and higher buildings, such as hotels and shopping complexes, call for increasing vigilance and effectiveness in fire prevention, fire detection and fire-fighting. Any fire, if not snuffed out quickly, may result in loss of lives and cause millions of dollars of property damage. The recent Pulau Merlimau refinery fire is a good reminder. In that instance, we were fortunate that no lives were lost although there was extensive damage and property loss.

Our Singapore Fire Service is prepared to deal with fire in our high-rise buildings. It has an on-going development programme to upgrade its fire-fighting equipment and to improve its effectiveness. It has 11 fire stations today. Three of these will be replaced by new ones. Another four will be constructed to give a total of 15 fire stations located strategically for quick response to fires anywhere in Singapore. This will enable the Fire Service to achieve a response time of less than eight minutes. Within the fire stations themselves, old equipment are being replaced and new equipment acquired to tap advances in fire-fighting technology. The officers and men of the Fire Service are also upgrading their skills and tactics in tackling high-rise and industrial fires.

All these developments and preparations in the Fire Service, however, will be inadequate if we do not pay enough attention to the basic question of fire prevention. The correct principle in fire safety is that a building must be properly planned, designed and built to be fire-safe in the first place. If fire occurs in such a building, there is a much better chance of success in preventing spread, fighting the fire and evacuating occupants.

The Singapore Fire Code is the mechanism for achieving the objective of making our buildings fire-safe. The Code stipulates fire safety requirements for buildings, such as fire-protected staircases, fire-lifts, smoke and flame detectors, alarm and sprinkler system. It is periodically reviewed by the Fire Safety Bureau and building professionals. Such reviews ensure that fire safety provisions are consistent with changes in building design trends, remain relevant to our local environment and can achieve the desirable standard of fire safety.

Prevention, of course, does not end with design, no matter how good. Proper maintenance is equally, if not more important. Building owners must constantly and consciously check that the fire detection and fire-fighting facilities in their buildings are always in operating condition. Evacuation routes and fire-exits must be checked to ensure no obstruction or else lives may be lost in the event of a fire. The safety of occupants in a building depends very much on the attitude of the building management and its readiness to practise fire-safety measures.

For the effective implementation of fire-safety programmes in buildings, especially high-rise buildings and large building complexes, I would suggest to building owners to set up in-house fire-safety committees comprising representatives of occupiers of such buildings. To further strengthen fire-safety and preparedness, the owners should appoint Fire Safety Managers of the building. The Singapore Fire Service could assist by providing guidance to the Committees in formulating fire-safety procedures, in laying down the "do's and don'ts", and in organising activities to promote fire-safety awareness.

Singapore has succeeded to attract a large number of tourists every year. Last year, we welcomed 4.19 million visitors and they spent about $5 billion here, thereby contributing significantly to our economy. The tourist industry, perhaps more than any others, is very sensitive to impressions and perceptions. Most tourists travel for pleasure and relaxation. Tourists seek entertainment and fun. They want value for money spent. They need to feel safe and secure during their stay. I dare say that without security, even the prettiest tourist attraction will be of no interest. Tourists will not come to Singapore if they do not feel safe in our hotels, restaurants, shopping complexes and other tourist attractions. The fact that our hotels and other public buildings have a first class record in fire safety is an important asset. I consider this Seminar organised by the Commercial Premises Committee (Hotels) of the National Fire Prevention Council as a reflection of the desire of the commercial sector, in particular the hotel industry, to make sure that this good record is carefully maintained. I compliment the Committee on this very worthwhile and public-spirited effort.

In conclusion, I remind you that unlike some other modern cities in recent years, Singapore has maintained an excellent record of no life loss in fires in high-rise commercial buildings. This is due to the conscientious efforts of the Singapore Fire Service, supported by building professionals, building owners, occupiers and managers. Let us continue to work together to keep our buildings safe for Singaporeans and visitors.

Now, with great pleasure, I declare this Seminar open and wish all the participants a fruitful discussion.
