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**SPEECH BY DR ONG CHIT CHUNG, PARLIAMENTARY
SECRETARY (HOME AFFAIRS AND LABOUR) AT THE
11TH ILO - ASIAN REGIONAL CONFERENCE,
BANGKOK, 26 NOV TO 2 DEC 91**

Mr President
Distinguished Delegates
Ladies and Gentlemen

On behalf of the Singapore delegation, I wish to congratulate you, Mr President, on your election to chair this 11th Asian Regional Conference. We are confident that under your able guidance, this Conference will be a success. I would also like to register our appreciation to the Government of Thailand for hosting this Conference and for the generous hospitality extended to us.

Mr President, we meet in a period of historic and momentous changes, and Asia is in a unique position to face and to benefit from such changes. Asia remains the fastest growing region in the world with GDP expanding almost four times as fast as industrialised countries this year. But we are not without our share of problems including widening trade deficits, shortage of skilled manpower, an inadequate industrial base and the threat of protectionism.

History does not provide any simple answer to our problems. Different approaches will have to be adopted to resolve problems faced by each country.

The experiences of the four Asian NIEs including Singapore perhaps can provide some useful pointers to other developing countries. These are:

First, invest in people. Provide good basic education and health care;

Second, improve the climate for enterprise: intervene less in pricing, deregulate entry and exit restrictions, and focus on providing adequate infrastructure and institutions;

Third, integrate with the global economy: cut back non-tariff restrictions as well as lower tariffs; and

Fourth, get macro-economic policy right: keep fiscal deficits low and inflation in check, and provide market-based incentive for saving and investment.

In 1980, a group of researchers published a study of Japanese mothers and mothers in Minneapolis USA. The mothers were asked to rank the most important things that a child needs to succeed academically. The answers tell a lot about the difference in the two cultures today. The mothers in Minneapolis chose "ability". The mothers in Japan said "effort".

To succeed in this perilous world requires a certain national characteristic. We Asians do have the drive and the determination. It is in our culture to be hardworking. This is indeed our single most precious asset. We have the will to succeed.

But national will alone may not be sufficient for us to overcome our problems. We have to pool our resources together to forge common areas of cooperation, and to share and learn from each other's experiences. That is why we are here today. It is, therefore, timely for the Conference to be discussing the issues of "growth and structural adjustment in the Asian region" with emphasis on employment and training in the 1990s, and that of "improving occupational safety and health". These are issues that will have a direct bearing on us all.

Next, Mr President, I would like to touch on the role of the ILO in the context of the new international political and economic order which I have earlier talked about. The role of the ILO in this new era should be one of facilitating social and economic development in member states. While it is important for us to ensure that our citizens and workers are given certain basic protection with regard to their terms and conditions of employment, it is perhaps more critical for us to ensure that there is

continued social and economic progress. Only then can the fruits of progress trickle down to the masses.

I am pleased to note that the ILO has, in recent years, adopted a less legalistic approach in its supervisory function. It is important that the ILO takes into consideration the different levels of social and economic development in each member state when compliance with ratified ILO conventions is reviewed. It should also bear in mind that developing countries cannot be straitjacketed into standards adopted by the developed countries.

Singapore would like to suggest that the ILO make regular visits to member states to see first hand developments in these countries so that it can make more meaningful and pertinent comments on the status of implementation of ratified conventions. This would also allow the ILO to be more appreciative of the domestic constraints member states have to face in implementing ratified conventions.

The ILO should perhaps consider focussing its attention on areas that bring more direct dividends to member states such as on training and technical advice. It should also pay more attention and speak up on international issues that affect the collective well-being of member states such as protectionism and

other barriers to trade.

While great efforts are being made to promote free trade through GATT and APEC, there is an increasing concern that economic integration in Europe and North America may lead to a fortress mentality among some nations. With nations becoming increasingly interdependent, a cooperative approach is essential in ensuring that such negative mentality will not prevail.

Mr President, Asia has the largest number of countries as well as the largest population. It has tremendous growth potential. Trade in our region is growing at a much faster rate than other parts of the world. It is therefore in our interest to play a positive and influential role in promoting free trade. Individually, we can set examples by opening up our markets. Let us work together to promote international trade and cooperation so that the world will be a better place to live in.

Thank you.