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MC/AUG/24/79(Labour)

18 AUG 1979

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SPEECH BY MR ONG PANG BOON, MINISTER FOR LABOUR,
AT THE 14TH NATIONAL DAY DINNER OF THE TELOK AYER CONSTITUENCY
HELD AT THE HONG LIM GREEN COMMUNITY CENTRE
ON SUNDAY, 12 AUGUST 1979 AT 7.30 PM

National Day 1979 is being celebrated in a changing and different Southeast Asia. When the Vietnam War ended, the world with cautious optimism had hoped for peace and prosperity for war-torn Indo-China. The aftermath of war has been a great disappointment to all those who want to see a stable and prosperous Southeast Asia. Instead, there are more wars, greater human misery, new conflicts and confrontation. The root cause of war and conflict in Southeast Asia lies in Vietnamese ambitions to dominate Indo-China. Vietnamese ambitions unwittingly serve larger Soviet aims in Southeast Asia. And so, the conflict of the communist powers in Euro-Asia is brought into Southeast Asia.

We have in recent months witnessed what the world would have thought impossible in the past. Imperialism, which, it was once thought, only the wicked capitalist nations of the West was capable of perpetrating, is now again on the rampage. Communist Vietnam has set out to dominate Indo-China, because it had thousands of veteran troops there. At the end of the war, Vietnam had no difficulty in setting up a client regime in Laos, with a semblance of consent and legality. The situation was different in Kampuchea. So, it had to send its crack divisions to do what it did in other ways in Laos. Thus, a nation whose resolute efforts to end colonialism have become an epic in history, is by its actions projecting itself to the rest of Southeast Asia as an imperialist power.

More disturbing still, it has also adopted policies that have invoked memories of Hitler and his policy of exterminating the Jews. The international community, with notable exceptions,

has awakened to /2.

has awakened to the fact that the Vietnamese Government now deliberately pursues policies which cruelly force thousands upon thousands of Vietnamese of Chinese origin as well as Vietnamese to flee the country in rickety ships in the hope of finding sanctuary anywhere. This is racism, backed by the ruthlessness of a communist system. The Vietnamese authorities moreover profit from the exodus. Experts have calculated that the gold extorted from the "Boat People" has become the biggest source of Vietnamese foreign exchange earnings.

And so the world has been moved by compassion to provide sanctuary to the "Boat People". In awakening the conscience of the world, ASEAN has played a crucial role. So, at Geneva, 65 nations have pledged more money and quicker procedures to provide permanent resettlement to those who have escaped drowning and found temporary asylum in Hong Kong and some ASEAN states. This is a relief, not a solution, because Vietnam has refused to do what is so patently necessary if its people are to find it better to rough it out at home than risk an uncertain fate at seas.

The Geneva meeting focussed on the "Boat People". The exodus of Kampuchean into Thailand only received incidental mention. This problem remains to be solved. The Vietnamese have stoutly resisted any attempt to treat the "Boat People" and the Kampuchean refugee question as political problems. And their tactic to treat the question as a humanitarian matter has strengthened because a number of nations are of the view that a softer approach will achieve better results. Time will tell whether such an approach has been the wiser course, but it definitely serve Vietnamese interests and ends. Vietnam and its allies have said that Indo-China is a special case, and that Vietnam has no designs to upset the stability of the rest of Southeast Asia.

If this is so, why has Vietnam been afraid to discuss the political aspect of the "Boat People" and the Kampuchean refugees? It is a fact that the exodus of refugees will destabilise Southeast Asia. In multi-racial Southeast Asia, the tuning up of racial tension is bound to cause political instability with international repercussions. As there is a large Chinese population in Southeast Asia, the expulsion of Vietnamese of Chinese origin to these countries is bound to affect race relations. In this way, anti-

Chinese feelings will be aroused. The large exodus of Kampucheans into Thailand will also destabilise that country. Thailand has been assured that Vietnam has no aggressive designs. Yet, it is now revealed that the Soviet Union and Vietnam have set up a rival Thai communist party in North-East Thailand, where the inhabitants are close in their language and customs to those of neighbouring Laos. Now, the rival party has as its objective the secession of North-East Thailand. Thailand is to be partitioned. Race is, therefore, used by the Vietnamese Government to destabilise South-east Asia, whether the race be Chinese, Laotians or Kampucheans. Vietnamese policy has, whatever the intentions of the Vietnamese, made the region the cockpit of Sino-Soviet rivalry.

It is not in the basic interest of Southeast Asia that Vietnam be allowed to continue to pursue policies that destabilise Southeast Asia. Instability will benefit no one except those who see in such a situation opportunities to further their imperialism. The first step to prevent such a development is to ensure that the political aspects of the refugee question be thoroughly dealt with and the exodus be stopped at source. There should be increasingly more pressure at international level to deal with the problem politically. World opinion should be mobilised in international conferences to achieve this objective, and those nations that can should exert direct pressure on Vietnam. The humanitarian approach that has been tried will provide relief to countries with refugees camps and greater hopes of permanent sanctuary and quicker resettlement for the victims. But there will be no prospect for stability in Southeast Asia until the root cause is removed.

Solving the problem at source is important for two reasons. Firstly, because it will be a major step to restore stability in Southeast Asia. Secondly, because the world community must demonstrate its will that it cannot allow any nation to avoid its responsibilities and obligations towards its citizens by making it impossible for some of its people to live in the country of their birth purely because the majority do not want them for reasons of race, religion and politics. A precedent cannot be set that will allow a nation to pursue policies to bring about an exodus of its unwanted people and the world be made to look cruel and uncaring if it does not provide the means^{and}/the land to resettle them.

Forty years ago, the world was engulfed in a global war because Nazi Germany had used race as a pretext to acquire territory and to chase away a minority, before it decided to exterminate it. It is a lesson the world should not forget or allow itself to forget. The world should have the moral courage to stand up and call a spade a spade. Part of that courage is to do all that is necessary to demonstrate to Vietnam that it cannot escape the consequences of its unreasonable policies.

A destabilised Southeast Asia is neither in our interest nor that of our partners in ASEAN. Such a situation will hinder economic progress, benefit the communist parties in our midst, and provide them with the opportunities to revive their now discredited cause. It will draw us into the Sino-Soviet conflict and the conflict of the global powers, and so negate all ASEAN efforts to be non-aligned and to concentrate on the welfare of our people. For our own survival, therefore, we must play our role in ASEAN and in the international community to ensure that stability returns to Southeast Asia, and that what the Vietnamese think as a solution to their problems is the kind of solution that the world will never permit in the conduct of human affairs. We must, therefore, demonstrate our will that, unlike the "Boat People", we are prepared to lay down our lives for our country. The kind of situation that creates the "Boat People" and Kampuchean refugees affects every section of our society. There is no class distinction in the misery that has been inflicted in Indo-China. Singaporeans must unite as one people and stay united. While we strive to better our lives, we should remember we also have our obligations towards the society that has made our prosperity possible. The rich, the successful, and the better-educated bear a special responsibility, and carry a special obligation to demonstrate this will and resolve, to meet the challenges of communism and racism.

So, on this National Day, let us re-dedicate our resolve to serve and defend our country. To protect what we have, and continue to strive for a more secure future for ourselves, our children, and our children's children.