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SPEECH BY MR ONG PANG BOON, MINISTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS AND ENVIRONMENT, AT THE BALLOTING OF THE MOORING BUOYS FOR LIGHTERS AT PASIR PANJANG AT WORLD TRADE CENTRE CONFERENCE HALL ON THURSDAY, 4 AUGUST 1983 AT 10.00 AM.

Our lightermen and their lighters have a well-earned place in the history of Singapore. For 160 years, they have been providing the vital link in transporting cargo between ships at the anchorages and godowns along the Singapore River banks. They have made it possible for produce of this region to be consolidated here in Singapore for onward shipment to other consumer countries. Many foreign shipping lines were attracted to call at our port because of the efficient services provided by our lightermen. Indeed, Singapore's phenomenal growth from a small trading post in South East Asia to a major world port owes much to the contribution of our lightermen.

Relocation of the lighters from their traditional working and mooring sites in the Singapore and Kallang River Basins may be misconstrued by some people as a deliberate attempt to phase out the lighterage industry. This is definitely not so. Although cargo handling operations have been revolutionised by modern technological advances, our lighterage industry will continue to provide the necessary back-up support to shipping and cargo handling activities. The simple truth is that no port, including Rotterdam, the busiest port in the world, can totally do without the complementary services provided by the lightermen.

Relocation is a necessary consequence of the Government's decision to clean up the water-catchment areas, thereby generally improving the people's living environment. The full cooperation and understanding that the lightermen have shown towards the relocation exercise speaks highly of their sense of priority and their recognition that changes must take place in the course of Singapore's development and progress.

The balloting of 120 mooring buoys for lighters this morning marks the final phase in the relocation programme. These buoys are part of the extensive new facilities which have been specially built for the lightermen and their lighters. Modern canteen facilities, toilets and office accommodation have been built at Pasir Panjang. For the protection of the moored lighters against rough weather, a breakwater has been constructed at a cost of \$6 million. With 19 additional lighter berths, Pasir Panjang Wharves is able to accommodate 37 working lighters at any one time. Waiting time for loading or unloading of cargo is therefore reduced.

These new facilities at Pasir Panjang for the lighters has cost the government a total of \$44 million. Indeed, it would have been far cheaper to pay cash compensation to the lighter operators instead of building these costly new facilities if it were intended to completely phase out the lighter industry. But the government recognises the special role that lightermen have played and will continue to play in the seaward movement of cargo in the port, for we are situated in an area where conventional shipping and coastal vessels still feature prominently in the regional trade. Hence, notwithstanding improvements in cargo handling methods such as the use of containers, the port will still have its share of vessels which are best served by lighters. Ship operators and owners will continue to have a choice of working their cargo in the traditional manner or to come alongside the PSA wharves.

At Pasir Panjang wharves, lighter operators will be able to continue working into the night whereas cargo handling at the Singapore River is restricted to daylight hours only. This will lead to higher productivity and better ship turnaround times. To further assist the lightermen, PSA has cut down and simplified documentation procedures for cargo handled by lighters. In addition, PSA has halved its dockage and wharfage charges for lighter operations outside the free trade zone at Pasir Panjang Wharves. All these measures will help ensure the continued survival of the lighterage industry.

By the end of this month, all lightermen will have moved to Pasir Panjang. A colourful chapter in the history of the Singapore and Kallang Rivers will come to an end. At the same time, a new chapter for Pasir Panjang, hopefully no less colourful, will begin. Given the experience, tenacity and resourcefulness of our lightermen, I am confident that they will be able to adapt, change, innovate and survive. I also have no doubt that, once settled in, they will find their new home a better and cleaner place to work in.

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