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INAUGURAL ADDRESS BY THE MINISTER OF STATE (LABOUR), MR. SIA KAH HUI,  
AT THE ILO/NOR ASIAN REGIONAL SEMINAR ON WORKERS' EDUCATION FOR  
MARITIME WORKERS AT APOLLO HOTEL ON MONDAY, MARCH 21, 1977 AT 10 A.M.

It gives me great pleasure to join you all at the Inaugural Session of this Regional Seminar on Workers' Education for Maritime Workers for Asian countries. This seminar, organised by the International Labour Organisation, together with the Norwegian Government and the Singapore National Trades Union Congress underlines the importance we all attach to maritime employment.

Maritime employment is of consequence to developing countries in a number of ways. Most important of all, it is a source of employment to the able-bodied men of the developing world. In the heyday of colonialism, colonial powers recruited seamen from their colonies for their ships carrying raw materials to their motherland and despatching manufactured goods to the colonies. Thus, the British used for instance Indian, Hong Kong, Chinese and Singaporean seamen while the Dutch employed Indonesians. Many western countries still use seamen of developing countries in their ships. While developing countries since independence have achieved economic growth, such growth have been eaten away by uncontrolled population growth. Thus, non-oil producing developing countries face major problems of unemployment and underemployment. Maritime employment offered by western shipping companies is a useful outlet therefore for the young men of the developing world.

Maritime employment may also be linked to efforts of developing countries to build their own shipping fleets and a large body of seamen to transport their products to developed countries. Some progress has been achieved but western shipping still dominates world trade of non-communist countries.

In the case of our Republic, the reasons I have just said about the importance of maritime employment apply. Our seamen sail on western ships. We have a national shipping line which at the end of last year had 18 ships with a deadweight tonnage of 522,665 tons.

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In addition, we operate an open registry system to enhance job opportunities for our seamen. As at the end of 1976, there were 776 ships registered here with a gross registered tonnage of 6,313,485 tons. Maritime employment is therefore given appropriate priority in our Republic.

A national body, the National Maritime Board, is responsible for the seamen. The Board provides pre-sea training for school leavers and arranges for companies to sponsor those who have completed such training. Pre-sea training for officers and engineers is provided at the Singapore Polytechnic.

Where the welfare of seamen are concerned, the Government ensures that they receive equitable terms and conditions of service. In 1973 the Government appointed a Board of Inquiry to look into the terms and conditions of work of seamen. After thorough consideration of the representations from maritime employers and the union, the Board presented Part I of its recommendations to the Government and they were accepted. The minimum rates of pay for seamen recommended by the Board are now being paid by all maritime employers who engage Singapore seamen. There are also legal safeguards against the exploitation of local seamen. For example, the National Maritime Board Act contains provisions regulating the selection and employment of seamen.

Much concern has been expressed in international forums on the safety of ships especially those sailing on ships under so-called flags of convenience. The Singapore Government fully supports safety and health on ships as it does for factories on land. Singapore is a party to a number of Inter-Governmental Maritime Consultative Organisation (IMCO) conventions including the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea 1960 and the International Loadline Convention 1966. Singapore has always adhered to these conventions. Its Merchant Shipping Act has provisions governing the safety and health of seamen. Ships registered in Singapore have to comply with the Act including all Regulations made under the Act. Sub-standard ships are severely dealt with. Such ships are de-registered.

The Government conducts inquiries under the Merchant Shipping Act into all major accidents involving Singapore registered ships. Where officers involved are found negligent, appropriate actions are taken against them including debarment from sailing on Singapore ships.

Given the importance of maritime employment to developing countries, developed countries have a contribution to make. They can provide more job opportunities to seamen of developing countries in view of their dominance of non-communist world shipping. With their expertise in this field, developed countries can easily provide greater assistance to developing countries in the training of seamen of the developing world. Much concern has been expressed in the West over the alleged exploitation of seamen from Asia and other developing countries. Certain organisations have even insisted that such seamen be paid on par with seamen of developed countries. We in developing world are no less concerned with the exploitation of seamen. This insistence on payment at unrealistically high rates will simply price our seamen out of their jobs. No one genuinely concerned with the welfare of seamen of developing countries would want this. A more appropriate proposal would be to peg the rates of payment to the standard of living in the country supplying the seamen. The supplying country should be allowed them to decide on the rates it deems appropriate and equitable after taking into consideration the prevailing economic conditions in the country.

Developing countries can also help themselves in this regard. They should ensure that their seamen are adequately trained not only professionally but also in correct work attitudes. Trained seamen with good working habits and attitudes will generate more job opportunities for their colleagues.

I am therefore pleased to note that trade unionists entrusted with responsibility of leadership and guidance of seamen in the Asian region are gathered here to discuss the problem of workers' education for maritime workers. I have been informed that the

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seminar is primarily intended to assist trade unions in the shipping industry to set up national workers' education programmes for maritime workers. Maritime employment is a specialised field. It is our hope that you would by the end of the seminar have gained a better insight into the various problems of workers' education in this field. We trust that when you return to your countries, you would be able to impart to your fellow trade unionists the relevant approaches suitable to your own national requirements.

I wish you a happy and fruitful stay in Singapore. It is now my pleasure to declare open this Seminar on Workers' Education for Maritime Workers.

MARCH 21, 1977.

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