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SPEECH BY MR TEH CHEANG WAN, MINISTER FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
AT THE 15TH ANNUAL DINNER OF THE INSTITUTION OF ENGINEERS,
SINGAPORE AT THE GOLDEN PHOENIX RESTAURANT, WORLD TRADE CENTRE
ON SATURDAY, 24 OCTOBER 1981 AT 7.30 PM

I am happy to be here with you tonight for your 15th annual dinner.

Two years ago when I was with you for your 13th annual dinner, I spoke then of the construction industry's period of buoyancy ahead in the 1980's. Today we are right in the midst of this extremely busy period of building activities. The building boom of this decade will far surpass the unprecedented boom of the seventies. The construction projects of this decade are much bigger, more complex and sophisticated in nature.

This year, we have already seen the completion of a huge project like the 1st phase of our Changi International Airport. We have also seen the advent of expressways on the Singapore scene. Already two expressways, the Pan-Island Expressway linking Changi to Jurong and the East Coast Parkway linking the city to Changi Airport have been completed as part of the expressway system planned for Singapore up to 1992.

Although in land-hungry Singapore, road development can only be of a modest scale, it nevertheless remains an important pillar of our overall transportation strategy. We have to be very selective in determining our transport corridors so as to reduce the sterilisation of land and to minimise inconvenience to affected residents and the public.

We are just beginning to feel the benefits of the expressway network. The extension of this network has been included in our long-

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term road development programme. Ultimately, the network will link up all the major areas of activity thus providing efficient transportation corridors.

An improved road network makes motoring pleasant and safe. It also performs a larger role of reducing fuel consumption caused by traffic congestion. Coupled with good construction practices and efficient maintenance, we are able to provide Singapore with safe roads. Special attention has also been paid to the protection of the pedestrian. Numerous controlled pedestrian crossings and walkways have been provided for the main roads to separate the pedestrian from vehicular traffic. An accelerated programme of pedestrian bridge construction has been undertaken over the past couple of years to prevent vehicle-pedestrian conflicts. While we are confident that these measures will definitely contribute to improving safety on our roads, ultimate road safety lies with the road users. Motorists must strictly observe traffic rules and regulations while pedestrians have to observe traffic signals and use the overhead bridges or underpasses designed for their safety.

The Japanese I believe, has one of the lowest rate of traffic accidents in relation to its high car-people ratio. I had an interesting experience in Osaka City. One Sunday, I was at a traffic intersection where the pedestrian signals were showing red. No one attempted to cross the road although there were absolutely no cars on the roads at all! This self-discipline is indeed remarkable, especially in comparison with our local situation where we have a fair share of people who not only totally disregard traffic signals and avoid pedestrian bridges but who even scale road barricades near pedestrian bridges. These people must realise that they are the ones who are most vulnerable on the roads. The amount of time and convenience they may save by refusing to wait for pedestrian signals or not using overhead bridges can only be minimal. A traffic accident on the other hand will easily land them in hospital for a few months if not totally disable or kill them. Isn't it thus extremely foolish to endeavour to save a couple of hours a year at the risk of one's own life?

I would like to come back on the subject of construction. The completion of the East Coast Parkway viaduct was not only satisfactory but was ahead of schedule by one month.

The Changi Airport Passenger Terminal, despite many difficulties faced by the contractor during the period of construction, was also completed on schedule and was ready to receive the President of Korea on 1 Jul 81. Both these jobs were undertaken by Japanese contractors.

On the other hand, numerous public projects undertaken by our local contractors have been behind schedule for several months. Why this great disparity in the performance of overseas and local contractors? One of the most important factor, I feel, is the brain power in management. In overseas firms it is very usual to find a large number of professional people like engineers, technicians, managing a contract. Our local contractors employ very few or hardly any professionals for their projects. Public housing in Singapore is one of the largest development activity. Yet I can count on the fingers of one hand, the total number of qualified professionals employed by local HDB contractors. Our local contractors also, have traditionally been reducing overheads by not employing professionals or higher paid personnel. But if our local contracting industry hopes to modernise and expand, it is essential for them to inject high brain power into their management. In the sixties, it was reasonable for contractors not to incur high overheads because construction projects were then relatively small. However, today, construction projects run into tens of millions of dollars. Poorly managed contracts will not only delay work but also increase construction costs. Our contractors must realise it is to their advantage to include the expertise of professionals into their ranks - both in their office and on job sites. In Singapore, there appears to be a very distinct segregation of professionals from contractors with professionals being tapped only as consultants for a job. It is my belief that engineers and other professionals should be encouraged to enter the contracting business themselves. By doing so, they will find equal if not greater benefits. Such a move will not only prove rewarding to the individual professional but will be extremely beneficial to our country for we are seriously lacking in high calibre manpower in the local construction industry.

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