

29 APR 1994

Singapore Government

PRESS RELEASERelease No. : 13/APR11-1/94/04/14

94-WKS-10

**SPEECH BY MR WONG KAN SENG, MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS,
AT THE SINGAPORE CIVIL DEFENCE FORCE (SCDF) WORKPLAN SEMINAR
1994 AT THE REGIONAL LANGUAGE CENTRE (REL) AUDITORIUM
ON THURSDAY, 14 APRIL 1994 AT 9.00 AM**

Over the last 12 years since its inception, the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) has made significant progress, and not just in terms of manpower and professionalism of the officers and men. Many key civil defence systems have been implemented or are at its final stages of planning. The Public Warning System which comprises 222 sirens installed islandwide was completed in 1992. Since then, nationwide public emergency exercises have been conducted every year. The civil defence shelter programme is also developing well. The SCDF, together with the other agencies involved in emergency preparedness, have improved their operational readiness.

I am also pleased to know that all of you, under the leadership of the Commissioner, are pressing ahead to consolidate your achievements and refine the various civil defence programmes developed over the years. At the last SCDF's Workplan presentation in 1993, you have set the pace to prepare Civil Defence for the 21st Century through the formulation of the 'Civil Defence Vision 2000' concept plan. This plan has identified the main areas of concern and focus for SCDF for the coming years. This was a positive step. It shows your commitment and determination to strive to take CD onto a higher level of operational readiness.

This morning, I would like to add a secondary theme to the concept plans.

CD VISION 2000 : SINGAPORE - A FIRE-SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Striving towards having a safe environment is crucial for Singapore. Our country must not only be free from crime, but it must also be safe by having protective measures against disasters and crises that threaten lives and our physical well-being.

In today's context, we do not expect a major emergency like war. But we can learn from the painful experiences of others by being prepared for it. I urge the SCDF to continue to keep up its level of preparedness and make the necessary adjustments and fine tuning to your programmes. Here, I note that the CD shelter programme has undergone a review to have shelters even closer to residents. The SCDF also has plans to extend the programme beyond new Housing and Development Board (HDB) estates into new private residential developments in the next phase.

However, we must never forget that peacetime also presents an equally important if not greater challenge to SCDF. In peacetime, fire is a constant threat. You fight battles against fire - big and small - everyday. Therefore while SCDF improves its operational readiness for a major emergency, it must be well-equipped to fight fires and prevent fires in peacetime.

To effectively achieve this goal, we have adopted a three-prong approach - (1) Effective legislation, (2) Strong safety enforcement and (3) Good fire-fighting and rescue capability.

I would like to add a fourth point: Strong public support and cooperation.

The recent introduction of the Fire Safety Act is a step taken to prevent fire occurrences, especially high-rise fires. This Act provides additional authority and powers to the SCDF to ensure compliance of fire safety regulations and requirements.

The Act is a clear indication of our commitment towards protecting lives and property. But having such legislation alone is not enough. SCDF will be enforcing the regulations through periodic inspections and spot checks. In this regard, let me remind everyone here that you must gather public cooperation by explaining to the public the need for strong enforcement measures. You must also exercise care, prudence and good judgement when enforcing the various fire safety regulations. You should not inconvenience the public unnecessarily.

The Fire Safety Act is a legislation meant to ensure the safety of members of the general public. It can only be truly effective if the SCDF's activities are complemented by good understanding of the Act and strong support of it by the general public. I urge everyone - especially the building owners, property developers and managers - to play an active and responsible role in maintaining a high standard of fire safety in our country. We are the ultimate beneficiaries of all these efforts. Everyone has the responsibility to ensure fire-safety in his home, workplace and public places.

Apart from prevention activities, we must also be ready to manage disasters, should they happen. The SCDF, as the main emergency response agency, must be operationally ready, capable and effective in the managing disasters. The challenges you faced are manifold:

First, you need to compete with other organisations to attract and retain talents into your senior and junior ranks.

Secondly, you need to optimise the scarce manpower resources available. For example, you may need to reduce the manning levels of the appliances and have the shortfall offset by manpower-saving equipment, better trained and multi skilled personnel.

Thirdly, you need to keep abreast with new or changing

risks and threats. I am glad to note that you are planning to have special units known as HAZMAT (Hazardous Materials) Teams operationally ready by 1997 to handle accidents involving hazardous materials. You can also look into enhancing your capability in handling oil refinery fires, disaster management and fire investigation.

Fourthly, you need to be well-equipped. You need to continue to look for effective equipment to bolster your capability and operational efficiency. If required, improve or innovate to meet your specific needs.

Lastly, it is not good enough to have talents and equipment without the complementary professional training. You must also ensure that the new Civil Defence Academy is completed on schedule and that it has all the necessary programmes to provide realistic professional training.

Let me conclude by saying that tragic events - either fires or disasters - can occur any time, anywhere. There must be no let up by the SCDF in preparing for any eventuality that requires its immediate response. The SCDF has done well in past incidents. It must keep up and improve upon this record. I am confident that with constant training, upgrading and exercises, you will be able to do so.

On this note, I wish you a fruitful and meaningful discussion at this workplan seminar.

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