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SPEECH BY DR YEO NING HONG, MINISTER FOR DEFENCE AND MP FOR KAMPONG GLAM GRC KIM SENG WARD AT THE LAUNCH OF THE UPGRADING EXHIBITION FOR BUKIT HO SWEE PRECINCT ON 14 SEP 93 AT 8PM AT BLK 6 & 8 JALAN BK HO SWEE

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I. Forty years ago, slums were widespread in Singapore, especially in the city. The Singapore Improvement Trust, set up by the Colonial Government, was unable to solve the problem of housing shortage.

II. Without proper housing, low income Singaporeans built their own squatter huts, with combustible materials like attap and wooden boards. Bukit Ho Swee was one of the most crowded attap slums. There was no electricity or tap water supply. Even basic sanitary services were absent.

III. These attap huts were serious fire hazards especially during the dry seasons in the middle of the year. Bukit Ho Swee was gutted by three big fires, in 1934, 1961 and 1968. The biggest fire of all took place right here, 32 years ago on 25 May 1961. Thousands of homes were burnt down. 16,000 people were made homeless. The PAP Government, which was elected to power only two years earlier, went into a crash building programme to provide some 12,000 housing units. Within the first year alone, some 3,000 units of flats were completed.

IV. Two-thirds of our residents have lived here since the flats were new. They have built up strong ties with their neighbours after many decades of togetherness. Until recently, if they want to improve their living environment, they have to move to the newer HDB estates. Then the community ties would be lost, and new ties would take many decades to rebuild.

V. The Upgrading Programme was therefore introduced to preserve the community ties in the older estates. At the same time it enables the Government to redistribute the nation's wealth to those in the lower income groups. Upgrading will transform old estates to make them comparable to those in the new towns, without the residents being uprooted from their neighbours, friends and familiar surroundings. Upgrading will also increase the value of flats and increase the assets of residents.

VI. Singaporeans had responded favourably to the upgrading programme. In the six demonstration precincts, more than 90% of the flat owners voted for the programme. In view of such strong support, the Government decided to bring forward the steady state of upgrading programme by two years ahead of schedule.

VII. To make upgrading affordable to all residents, Government will subsidise heavily. For a three room flat owner, the residents' share of the upgrading cost is only 8% or about \$3,500 for the Standard Package, and about 20% or \$13,400 for Standard Plus with a space adding item.

VIII. As a special concession, flat owners will start payment only after all the upgrading works are completed. They can pay by instalment over 5 or 10 years through their CPF savings. The interest is only 0.1% above the prevailing CPF rates. For residents with special financial difficulty, HDB will consider helping on a case-by-case basis, e.g. by deferring payment for a year or until the flats are sold or transferred to other owners. This way, no flat owner will be deprived of a chance to upgrade and to receive Government's subsidy, simply because of financial problem.

IX. The upgrading programme marks the second chapter of the Government's public housing programme. Bukit Ho Swee was fortunate to be among the first to benefit from the first chapter of our public housing programme in the early 1960's. Today, we are fortunate again to be the first among the steady state precincts to be offered the upgrading programme. This is another important milestone and a great honour for our residents. The success in this precinct will make us once again a symbol of success and a model for other precincts to follow.

X. Over the last few months, a Working Committee which comprised grassroots leaders and City Centre Town Council, working closely with HDB representatives, has been busy collecting feedback from you on your preference of the upgrading items. An upgrading package which incorporates your feedback is now offered to you.

XI. The upgrading works will radically transform the precinct into a garden environment, with new apartment blocks facades, and improvements within your flats. You can also vote to decide whether you want an additional toilet in your flat. You can see for yourselves from the model how beautiful our precinct will be after the upgrading. I am sure all of you will be proud residents of this beautiful precinct.

XII. There are so many improvements in the upgrading that it is impossible for individual residents to carry out. This is a rare opportunity to have so many improvements at such low cost to you. I must remind all of you that the upgrading programme can be implemented only if 75% or more of the flat owners vote for it. I therefore encourage you to take some time to go through the exhibition to see the benefits for yourself, and convince yourself of the advantages for you and your family. Your decision at the polling booth will decide whether these benefits and advantages could become a reality.

XIII. It is now my pleasure to declare open the upgrading exhibition for Bukit Ho Swee precinct.

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