



SPEECH

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SPEECH BY MINISTER FOR DEFENCE DR NG ENG HEN AT THE DEFENCE SCHOLARSHIP AWARDS CEREMONY ON 29 JUL 2020 AT 1715HRS

Mr Lee Tzu Yang, Chairman, PSC
PSC Members,
Senior officials from MINDEF, SAF, DSTA, DSO National Laboratories
CDF, Chief of Services and other senior commanders
Parents,
Principals of Polytechnics and colleges,
Teachers too,
Scholarship Recipients,

INTRODUCTION

1. First let me wish everyone a good afternoon and good health. The Defence Scholarship Awards Ceremony is usually held at the Istana. It is the highest privilege that we accord to recipients, to signal this Government's commitment to raise and nurture defenders of our nation in the SAF, MINDEF, DSTA and DSO. But due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we are meeting remotely this year, connected through the internet. It's certainly not as grand as the Istana, but the significance of this award is in no way diminished. That is the reason the Chairman and members of the PSC, the top leaders of MINDEF and SAF as well as Principals of your colleges and Polytechnics are all here to witness this occasion. We have also arranged for recipients to receive their awards in person from representatives from MINDEF/SAF, DSTA, or DSO at your homes, in the presence of your loved ones.

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2. This is the third year that we combine all defence scholarships into one ceremony. It used to be done in separate ceremonies for different types of scholarships. I discussed with then-PS (Permanent Secretary) and CDF (Chief of Defence Force) and took soundings from recipients themselves including SAFOS officers. We all felt that a change would be in keeping with the zeitgeist of not only MINDEF and the SAF and indeed of Singapore. It signalled a less tiered society and one that recognises the intrinsic worth of every individual. It did not mean that the responsibilities of its leaders are not diminished, which indeed are more onerous given the rising complexity of MINDEF/SAF and threat scenarios, but what was just as essential was unity and a shared collective response, whether as a soldier, engineer, scientist, doctor or administrator, to build a strong national defence that can protect Singapore's interests and our people. We face these security challenges as one, as reflected in this combined ceremony.

3. This year, the highest number of scholarships will be awarded ever – 95 in all. The quality of recipients has been maintained, if not enhanced, as the number of applications also hit another record, close to 2,000 applicants in all. I am also heartened that successful applicants were chosen from a broad spread of Polytechnics and Junior Colleges. These applications were received starting in last August, prior to the onset of COVID-19 and therefore the ensuing downturn was not the reason for the increase. What then are the likely reasons then for the record interest to work in MINDEF and SAF? Let me name two. First, our surveys indicate a healthy and strong support for the national defence, above 90%! That our younger generation too have imbibed the need for Singapore to have a strong SAF bodes well for our collective future. Second, a career in MINDEF/SAF offers a premium and value proposition for those that fit its mission and character. It's not just that some high-profile scholars consistently go on to lead Ministries and statutory boards or enter politics. That applies to only a few each year. More broadly, I believe that the skill sets and values of personnel within MINDEF and the SAF hold value and is transferable even after they leave to other vocations and career paths. What do I mean? Let me illustrate with how MINDEF and SAF contributed to the national response in this COVID-19 outbreak.

CONTRIBUTING TO THE NATIONAL RESPONSE TO COVID-19

4. In early April, MINDEF agencies and the SAF were asked to assist the whole of Government response to contain the COVID-19 outbreak in the migrant worker dormitories. We have begun such efforts prior to that, but the outbreak within the dormitories was a more serious problem

that could overwhelm our entire healthcare system, if not contained. If that happened, the number of severely ill and deaths would rise, not only from COVID-19 but also from other diseases, similar to the situation in Hong Kong which the Chief Executive had recently warned against. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, we had in total about 9,000 public hospital acute beds, and ICU beds in the hundreds. No healthcare system in the World builds itself with a buffer wide enough to accommodate a full-blown pandemic like COVID-19. Even for SARS, the maximum number of patients in the designated ICU was around 20. But other countries, which had seen an exponential rise in COVID-19 infections, experienced devastating consequences as their elderly succumbed with not only hundreds but thousands requiring ICU care. On any given day, our public hospitals already see tens of thousands of Singaporean with other illnesses, and therefore needed extra resources to deal with this unprecedented health crisis.

5. Over the next one to two months, from April, the Multi-Ministry Task Force (MTF), with the assistance of the SAF, MINDEF-Related Organisations and other agencies, would build more beds than all public hospitals combined to house and treat those affected by COVID-19. How many beds did we build? 11,000 more in one to two months! The SAF helped oversee this massive effort, involving over 6,000 personnel, led by senior officers – Generals and Colonels – in the thick of operations. DSTA provided the C2 (Command and Control) systems to co-ordinate some of these efforts, helped build new mobile swab stations, self-check temperature kiosks and analytics software for better contact tracing, as well as acted as chief procurement officer. We were fortunately prescient and ordered 20,000 pulse oximeters from commercial vendors. This was before scientific papers clearly documented how the oxygenation of COVID-19 patients could de-saturate quickly and end up in the ICU if detected late. This is one important reason why despite the large numbers of migrant workers affected, relatively few ended up in the ICU. Very early on in the outbreak, DSO had already re-configured their labs to test for COVID-19, and went further to research better methods to reduce the steps, and reduced the testing time by more than half, to between 60 and 90 minutes. DSO officers also isolated antibodies against COVID-19 harvested from infected patients here. Clinical trials will start in upcoming months. As the numbers of infected grew, the SAF Medical Corps stepped up and provided medical services for a Community Care Facility (CCF). This involved NSmen, who were called up as part of their in-camp training duties, and performed with excellence. I visited them at the Expo, as well as the SAF health teams at the S11 Dormitory @ Punggol. Our SAF soldiers undertook their tasks with professionalism and commitment.

HANDLING UNCERTAINTY

6. I have provided some snippets of the SAF's and MINDEF's contributions not to praise them, even though they are deserving, but to illustrate what kind of organisations you as recipients of awards today will join. When the SAF and MINDEF organisations were asked to assist, it was not as if our staff had been trained for these tasks. There is no manual on "How to deal with COVID-19". There are no precedents on setting up CCFs, CRFs (Community Recovery Facilities), or optimising lab testing for a novel virus. MINDEF and SAF personnel could have easily thrown up their hands in despair dealing with all the unknowns and new challenges, that are not core to our organisations. It would have been understandable and few would have blamed them. But we didn't. Indeed, we systematically surveyed the terrain, size up the challenge and key deliverables. We broke a massive challenge into digestible parts, marshalled resources to deal with each, and contained the problem whether it was contact tracing, lab testing, health monitoring, packing masks, moving sick and infective patients around – the list goes on. All this done while ensuring that our own people did not get infected, and continuing critical operations for national security, which the SAF still remained in charge of.

7. There is a well-known aphorism that problems either break or define you. MINDEF and SAF's response to the COVID-19 problem has defined it as a well-oiled machine, with top-notch leadership and strong professionalism across its ranks. In times of crisis, we can deliver even against unknown opponents and in short order. You as recipients can be rightly proud and excited that you are joining its ranks and in due course when similarly called upon, must keep to these high standards set by your predecessors.

8. These qualities of our officers and personnel – to be able to analyse complex even chaotic situations, to formulate plans that can be executed amid the disorder, to be able to marshal the appropriate resources and manpower to deal with wicked problems will always be highly valued, not only in the military and defence arenas, but in business, Government, indeed in all spheres of society.

9. At the same time, while dealing with these unexpected challenges, MINDEF and SAF cannot be distracted from known security challenges, whether dealing with terrorism, maritime security in the seas around us or troubled US-China relations.

10. Your ability to not only remain steady but thrive under pressure and uncertainty will be cultivated in your careers as MINDEF and SAF staff, where the unknown and uncertain are actually norms. Few if any, could have predicted that we would send SAF units to faraway places like Afghanistan, Iraq or the Gulf of Aden. Or that our aircraft would need to deal with forest fires or search for lost planes. Or that we would have to deal with a full-blown biological threat. I do not know what the next big challenge is. We can only be certain that there will be such unknown unknowns and for which you as leaders when the time comes, must find solutions for, to protect Singapore and Singaporeans.

11. I would like to take this opportunity to extend my gratitude to those who have committed time and effort to help find recipients with the aptitude and abilities to take up this challenge and high calling. I thank Chairman PSC, PSC members, leaders from MINDEF/SAF, DSTA and DSO who spent many hours sieving through outstanding applicants, as well as your principals and teachers who remain our best scouts on the ground. All their efforts was to entrust those chosen today with this critical mission to defend Singapore and her interests.

CONCLUSION

12. When you return after completing your formal education, you will join us in dealing with these real life challenges for Singapore. It is a high calling and one that can fill your days in MINDEF, SAF, DSTA and DSO with great satisfaction knowing that your contributions keep our loved ones safe from harm and Singapore as a sovereign nation.

13. Congratulations once again. I wish you well in your studies and future careers with us. Thank you very much.

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