

## ***ANNEX D- Opening Address by Guest of Honour***

**SPEECH BY ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR HO PENG KEE, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE FOR LAW & HOME AFFAIRS AT THE ASIAN CRISIS MANAGEMENT CONFERENCE AT ORCHARD HOTEL ON THURSDAY, 12 OCTOBER 2006 AT 9.00 AM**

Commissioner James Tan,

Distinguished guests from International Civil Defence and Disaster Management Agencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning.

2. I am very happy to be here to join you this morning on this important subject of crisis management. Whether natural or man-made, disasters can cause great damage and widespread human suffering. For this reason, crisis management is critical. If done well, crisis management can minimise loss of lives, reduce injuries, and prevent widespread damage. More importantly, by planning for it we can survive the unthinkable.

3. There is some misconception that crisis management is only about managing post-disaster. While crisis management swings into action when a crisis occurs, how well we survive the crisis depends on the preparatory work that has been done. In other words, crisis management has as much to do with anticipating, preparing and mitigating the potentially disastrous effects of an incident before it unfolds. The ultimate delivery of effective crisis management is averting the crisis altogether.

### **Crisis Management in the New Operating Environment**

4. Some crises cannot be averted totally despite the best of efforts and intentions. The context of crisis management is generally natural disasters caused by say, earthquakes and hurricanes, as well as man-made disasters, such as building collapses and rail accidents. We cannot stave off a natural disaster like an earthquake or

hurricane. Neither can we precisely predict the onset of calamities like an earthquake or a volcanic eruption. This is the same with some man-made disasters. Nobody can predict precisely when a building structure will collapse.

5. The sudden emergence of a disaster or crisis is a major challenge that civil defence and disaster management agencies have to deal with. Let me highlight two other challenges which are brought on by today's new operating environment.

#### Global Terrorist Threat

6. Today's operating environment is different in at least two ways. One, we are confronted by a global threat of terrorism. Different countries may have experienced various episodes of terrorist attacks. The threat of terrorism that is confronting the world today is different in that the threat is a global one and affects all countries. The target of attacks has also shifted in that terrorists now aim to kill, whereas in the past they were more inclined to strike fear by threatening to carry out attacks.

7. The 11 Sep attacks on New York city and the subsequent attacks on public transport systems in Madrid, London and Mumbai, all targeted commuters and the public. The additional challenge to civil defence and civil management agencies is in mitigating the deliberate damage of terrorist attacks. Unlike a natural disaster, terrorist attacks are deliberate attempts at killing people. The more determined the terrorist, the larger would be the killing zone. The challenge to civil defence and disaster management agencies is finding ways to better protect, anticipate, prevent and mitigate deliberate attempts to rob lives, cause injuries, and destroy property.

#### Influenza Pandemic

8. The second difference in today's operating environment is that nature's bite threatens to be more severe as we prepare ourselves for the possibility of a H5N1 human influenza pandemic. Our experience with the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome or SARS in 2003 indicates that if a H5N1 human outbreak has similar morbidity and mortality as SARS, our economy and social behaviour could be badly affected.

9. Experts already predict that an influenza pandemic could be many times more

severe than a SARS outbreak. Influenza pandemics occurred three times in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely in 1918, 1957, and 1968. According to experts, it is only a matter of time before another influenza pandemic occurs. The critical uncertainties are the attack rate and mortality rate. By way of comparison, the SARS outbreak in Singapore resulted in 33 deaths. In the 1918 influenza pandemic, an estimated 20 to 40 million people died worldwide. The WHO or World Health Organisation, has predicted that a pandemic today may result in 2 million to 7.4 million deaths. About thirty to 40 percent of the world's population are likely to be sick and two per cent will die. In other words, the more infectious and the more deadly the H5N1 virus, the graver the consequences are likely to be. The challenge to civil defence and disaster management agencies is finding ways to help an afflicted society to recover and to restore confidence in its people.

### **Confronting the Challenges**

10. History has demonstrated time and again that no country can adequately deal with a disaster entirely on its own. No country has unlimited resources. No country is strong on all fronts. By working together, countries can share resources and build on the strengths of each other. In this light, it is indeed encouraging to see the international community coming together to help countries in this region which were hit by some of the worst natural disasters in recent times. An observation made from the Asian Tsunami of Dec 2004 is that the logistics of disaster relief is a critical cog in the management of that crisis. Post-disaster, there would be no lack of donors. However, getting humanitarian aid like medicine and food supplies to a disaster zone could be a great challenge to any civil defence and disaster management agency, especially if it is located in a remote location.

11. That countries work together is especially critical if an influenza pandemic descends upon us. Viruses know no bounds, especially with the volume and speed of international air travel today. While countries can try to ring-fence and prevent community outbreak of the virus, no country can completely prevent the virus from being imported into the country. By working together, health authorities, civil defence and disaster management agencies can quickly learn from each other better ways of containing the virus and preventing community spread. Indeed, time is of the essence when combating or containing any spread of viruses.

12. There are also valuable lessons which civil defence and disaster management agencies can learn from each other on the way a crisis is managed. Through conferences and workshops such as this one, practitioners can share their experience and help others to short-circuit the learning process and gain exponential experience in managing different types of crises in multiple terrains and operating environments. This is especially useful in confronting the challenge posed by terrorism.

13. Terrorists deliberately attempt to carry out attacks to kill people. For instance, by studying the modus operandi that terrorists use, we can all learn lessons on how to avert similar attacks. We will not be able to completely eradicate all threats. However, we would be prepared for as many possibilities of attacks and better ready to deal with an attack when it happens.

### **Empowering the People**

14. The best efforts of civil defence and disaster management agencies alone cannot help a community or society overcome a crisis or disaster. The Red Cross 2005 World Disaster Report has rightly pointed out that people need information as much as water, food, medicine or shelter. This is because information is empowerment and knowing what to do in a disaster or crisis can and do save lives and property.

15. An important tenet of Singapore's approach to crisis management is therefore community emergency preparedness. The Singapore Civil Defence Force takes emergency preparedness very seriously and this is one of its core functions. Over the years, the SCDF has introduced various ways to encourage our people to be better prepared for emergencies. These include distributing easy-to-read booklets on emergency preparedness, organising community-based emergency exercises, and encouraging households to pack their own READY Bags, which is a collection of essential items that could come in handy in an emergency. The challenge moving forward is finding more innovative ways to encourage our people to make emergency preparedness a way of life. I hope that this is an area which civil defence and disaster management agencies can share their experiences with each other.

16. On this note, it gives me great pleasure to open the Fourth Asian Crisis

Management Conference. I wish all of you a fruitful conference and a most enjoyable stay in Singapore. Thank you.