

**SPEECH BY MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT AND WATER RESOURCES
AND MINISTER-IN-CHARGE OF MUSLIM AFFAIRS DR YAACOB IBRAHIM AT
THE HARI RAYA GET-TOGETHER HELD AT THE SHANGRI-LA HOTEL ON FRI
17 SEPTEMBER 2010, 8.10PM**

Distinguished Guests

Community Leaders

Ladies and Gentlemen

Embracing the Young and reaching higher to be a Community of Excellence

1. We have just heard the rich voice of Amni Musfirah. Before today, she has already sung for the APEC Finance Ministers Meeting and the Singapore International Water Week. A 15 year old student of SOTA – the School of the Arts – Amni is one of Singapore’s top young talents. Similarly, 14 year old Aisyah Salim from Geylang Methodist Secondary School won the Stomp MMSing Talent Awards. Aisyah also sang at the recently concluded Youth Olympic Games. Both Amni and Aisyah have a following on YouTube.
2. Our community continues to progress on many counts. Such progress is due much to the foresight and unstinting efforts by the past and current generation of leaders. The pioneer generations gave of themselves willingly, expecting nothing in return. Even though we do have challenges on various fronts and cannot let up in our efforts to uplift the whole community, the overall picture is brighter, thanks to their toils. And so, this evening I want to look a little more towards our future – a vision for our young – how they are doing and how they should be encouraged, guided and placed in positions of responsibility so that they can eventually lead in the continuous effort of building a strong community and a stronger nation. I also want to talk about recognising and enhancing the documentation of our collective efforts in community- and nation-building which senior leaders in our community have witnessed and been a part of. Their wisdom must be captured and continue to be tapped so that we maintain continuity and sense of mission.

Many ways to the top

3. Singapore is constantly tuning itself towards success. Today, our education system offers multiple pathways, suiting each student’s pace and talent, and recognising efforts all the way. Hence we are seeing many more

Malay/Muslim students embarking on different pathways, getting exposed to different modes of learning. They discover their strengths in the process, and develop their potential – whether it is the arts, sports, technology, IT or mathematics and science. The emergence of specialist schools such as SOTA, Sports School, School of Science and Technology, NUS High School for Math and Science, International Baccalaureate Programme, and the various Integrated Programmes (or IP) have given many more opportunities for our students to hone their skills and realise their potential. There are already some 400 Malay/Muslim students studying in such schools. These numbers will grow over time as more parents and students become familiar with such pathways. This spread of talent bodes well for our community's future as it will consequently be reflected in the depth of our community's capability and capacity.

4. Many more Malay/Muslim students are doing well. For the upcoming Anugerah Mendaki and the Goh Chok Tong Youth Promise Awards, we already have a list of 350 students slated for the awards, including a record 16 who have got the elusive First Class Honours. The spread of the winners have gone beyond traditional areas into disciplines such as life sciences, IT, and aeronautical engineering. Hence we see a growing diversity of talent within our community.
5. In the midst of this strong performance, we see good examples of perseverance among students who pick themselves up despite a weak start and take the long climb to achieve excellence. Mohamed Akbar Akhtar went from EM3 stream in primary school to ITE (West) Balestier. He then went on to the Singapore Polytechnic and then to NUS - graduating with First Class Honours in Electrical and Electronics Engineering. Along the way he was part of the National Fencing Team. He also won the Tay Eng Soon and Lee Kuan Yew Scholarships for upgrading. He is indeed a fine example of the never-say-die attitude we want in our community.
6. Similarly we have individuals who despite personal adversities in life still come out on top. Temasek Polytechnic's Muhammad Aliff did not let the need to look after his disabled father deter him. An only child who works part-time as a valet for jockeys he worked extra hard. So when he came up with the idea of 'EZ Transfer Wheelchair', his lecturer and teammates at Temasek Polytechnic bought the idea. The project won the silver medal at the ASEANpreneurs Idea Canvas and a merit award at the Institute of Engineers Design Award competition. These are examples of perseverance and determination; values now increasingly associated with our community.
7. There is also no substitute for persistent effort. So when Abdul Dayyan from Madrasah Al-Irsyad won a YOG bronze partnering Turkey's Begunhan Elif

Unsal at Archery mixed event, it was a culmination of 8 years of training and competitions that started under the watchful eye of his father but pushed through self-motivation, and sharpened through stints abroad including Italy and Taipei. Abdul Dayyan learnt more by watching top Korean archers. This kind of determination was also shown by Victoria School's Jeffrey Lightfoot in leading his teammates against bigger players in YOG football, suffering a gash in the third place play-off, getting stitched up and coming back to the field to receive the team bronze.

8. Amni Musfirah, Aisyah Salim, Mohamed Akbar Akhtar, Muhammad Aliff, Abdul Dayyan, Jeffrey Lightfoot and many others in our schools and institutions of higher learning represent a growing base of potential achievers in our community. We have a small number of them sitting amongst us here tonight. They are reaping the benefits provided by a strong and supportive education system. Indeed a family's financial background is no stumbling block. With caring families encouraging our students to do their best and a community that puts a high premium on excellence, our students can and will succeed in whatever path they choose. They will become part of our growing class of PMETs – financially secure and able to take on new opportunities here and abroad.

Embracing the young

9. But is the dream for our young only about good grades and good jobs only? What about character-building and values like compassion and conscientiousness? The sort of young people we want will determine the type of society we will become in the coming decade. How do we distinguish our young such that their presence will make the difference in for our community and nation? And what sort of life skills and values do we want them to have?
10. We want them to be adaptable and flexible and be lifelong learners to ensure lifelong employability. But clearly we should be more ambitious and go beyond this. We have a window of opportunity here to shape an entire generation of young people with the kind of outlook to life that will make a more significant difference. I want to see our young people plugged into the entire human enterprise of building a strong and vibrant community and a great nation. Like the earlier generations of leaders after independence who worked tirelessly to find solutions for society, we need now a new generation to do the same and more. We want them to be an integral part of our nation building efforts in the coming decades.
11. And we can do this by creating opportunities for our young people to pick up skills and gain experience that will make them confident and help them shine in suitable community roles. These opportunities should allow them to demonstrate their problem-solving skills and leadership needed for a

globalised world. In fact, there is a growing trend of young people volunteering within the community and also with VWOs beyond the community. And we should encourage more of our young to seize the many opportunities available at both the community and national level. But within our own community we can create more meaningful opportunities for volunteerism and leadership roles for our young.

12. It is for this reason that my fellow Malay MPs and I decided that we need to engage our young through a more formal set up. Hence, through the Community Leaders' Forum secretariat in Mendaki, we organised the Forward Planning Exercise (FPE) involving over 90 young Malay/Muslims from a wide cross section of our community. Through this exercise our youth are engaging in wide ranging discussions and reflections, together with our community leaders and others beyond the community. Their task will be to project a future for our community in the coming decades. We hope to help our youth to take in the big picture as well as to get a handle on details on the ground so that they are empowered to assume a meaningful community role in the future. It is from this generation of young people that the future leaders of our community will emerge. Hence we all have a stake in this process.
13. I am happy to announce that as a result of this process, Mendaki Club and Young AMP will be embarking on a joint project to reach out to our young. The objective of this engagement is to instill greater consciousness, as well as cultivate critical and creative thinking on core issues of the day. In the long term, the project should aim to develop a network of socially-conscious and empowered youths who can contribute to the community, nation and the wider world.
14. Apart from opportunities to volunteer, we are also seeing a trend of young people taking on roles with leadership responsibilities and obligations. Several Malay/Muslim organisations have been conscious in inducting young people into its leadership ranks alongside existing and more experienced leaders.
15. And we are also seeing this happening in one particular sector: our mosque management boards, or better known by the acronym MMB. Let me share some numbers with all of you. In the year 2000, there were no MMB members within the age group of 21 to 30 years old. Today there are 50 from this age group. If we look at the conventional definition of youth being those between 21 and 39 years of age we will again see an upward trend. In 2000, we had 42 MMB members within this age group. Today the number stands at 168; a four-fold increase within 10 years. If we look at the other end of the age spectrum, those above 60 years of age, we see a downward trend from 235 in year 2000 to 115 in 2010. The average age of our MMB members have declined from 55 in 2000 to 48 in 2010. Our MMB members are getting

younger. This is a good sign as it shows that our community is prepared to embrace younger Malay/Muslims as mosque leaders. We should do the same for all other sectors of leadership in our community. There is one more figure from the mosque sector which I find encouraging. In 2000, there were only 63 females in our MMBs. Today, the number stands at 111; almost double. In other words, we recognise the talent of our ladies and are prepared to accept them in positions of leadership even in our mosques. While these developments are in progress, MUIS has ensured that senior leaders who have stepped down have not left the scene but continue to have various platforms to share their wisdom and provide inputs to younger officials. So a new balance is being achieved. Allahyarham Ustaz Ahmad Sonhadji who left us recently after a lifetime of contributions and progressive outlook would surely have been proud had he been with us to hear of these developments.

16. Our mosques today are a lot different from the days when I volunteered my services at a small kampong mosque in Bedok. Gone are the days when volunteers at our mosques just rolled out the mats and stacked the chairs, or like what former MUIS Secretary Syed Haroon used to do when he was youngster – volunteer to make the prayer call. These activities remain important but today as Syed Haroon as a MUIS Board Member will tell you there is a need to go far beyond to exercise greater professionalism in the way our mosques are being run. Mosques have to be maintained for much larger congregations, classes for young and old have to be organised, accounts have to be consolidated and submitted to MUIS, community engagement and interfaith activities have to be carried for the larger community. Mosques have to link up with community organisations so that referrals and support can be organised for people who need them. Hence in volunteering at our mosques, our young are exposed to a myriad of opportunities that I believe will put them in good stead for contribution at any level. More importantly, with the mix of experience and vitality, our mosques today are more vibrant thereby contributing to a more meaningful and enriching religious life for all of us.
17. Perhaps we can do more in this area of leadership community-wide. As such, I would like to propose that as a community we should aim for a generational shift in the leadership of our community in the coming decade. Ten years is a sufficient length of time for us to induct young and talented Malay/Muslim individuals into leadership roles with the view that they assume these roles by the end of the decade. I am confident that as a community we can excel even further and perhaps faster if we provide opportunities for our young to achieve their potential and assume leadership roles within the community and beyond.
18. But we must not forget that their success owes very much to the efforts of the pioneers – our past and current leaders. Many Malay/Muslim leaders have

worked tirelessly to create platforms and institutions that allow our young people to do better in their lives. This story and the many sacrifices made cannot be forgotten. Our challenges before and after independence in 1965, the decisions we made as a community in dealing with these challenges provide a useful learning ground for our young. Hence I would like to propose for the Malay Heritage Foundation, whose existence is due to the efforts of Hj. Ridzwan Dzafir and Hj. Zainul Abidin Rasheed, and now under the leadership of Madam Zuraidah Abdullah, to consider enhancing the documentation of our heritage. A heritage series focusing on different aspects of the struggle and contributions of the Malay/Muslim community in Singapore would provide an acknowledgement and a lasting legacy to the efforts of many who have strived to make a better world for all of us. At the same time this series will be valuable inputs to the development of our young.

Aiming for a higher target

19. Without a doubt, as a community we have done well. The percentage of Malay/Muslim students progressing to post-secondary education has increased significantly – data for Malay students by cohort shows that the percentage has gone from 70% to more than 85% over the last 10 years. There is now a momentum of families wanting their children to do better in their educational pursuit. Hence, let us catch this momentum and set for ourselves a more ambitious educational target for the next decade. Over the years, we have seen an increasing number of Malay/Muslim students attaining tertiary qualifications, that is polytechnic or university qualifications. With plans for more tertiary spaces in Singapore, there will be many more opportunities for our young to seize upon. The percentage of Malay/Muslim students progressing to tertiary education has increased significantly. The Malay cohort percentage has moved up from 26% to more than 35% over the last 10 years. I would like our community to take on the challenge of increasing this proportion to 40% by 2020. Looking at the trend and the numbers I believe this is not beyond us. Let's work towards achieving this and beyond so that our community will have a better future.
20. Integrating our young into the core of our community must lead to something better for our community. If on the other hand, we do not maximise their potential and vitality, and to only allow them maintain the status quo, then the exercise would be futile. They will continue to excel in their studies, and in material pursuits. And they will become part of the middle class. But that alone would be a pity and to my mind a great loss of potential for our community. But if we allow their potential to develop and grow, guide them from the back, and inspire in them a transformative vision of a Community of Excellence then they become a revitalising force for our community. So let us work together to shape the next generation. Let us harness their potential,

embrace their creativity, develops their minds and outlook so that they will constantly look towards improving our community and nation. Let's us build the next generation of progressive leaders from this current generation of young people.

21. Indeed, our community is on the path of excellence. Excellence is not about winning at all cost. Excellence is about putting aside time and effort; not being disheartened when things are not going our way or receiving negative comment but constantly seeing how we can achieve our potential and be a productive member of society – improving our contributions and helping others to uplift themselves. Our challenges are not insurmountable when our community is united, blessed with good leaders, and has the firm support of government and an enlightened multiracial multireligious society. Even as we progress, compassion and cooperation must always be our hallmarks. I am confident we are on the road towards excellence.

22. Thank you.