

**SPEECH BY MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT AND WATER RESOURCES
AND MINISTER-IN-CHARGE OF MUSLIM AFFAIRS MR. MASAGOS ZULKIFLI
FOR MUIS' ONLINE WORK PLAN SEMINAR 2020 ON FRIDAY, 24 APRIL 2020**

BUILDING A RESILIENT COMMUNITY OF SUCCESS, TOGETHER

Assalamualaikum Waramatullahi Wabarakatuh

1. Dear Leaders of our religious institutions, community leaders, and Muis stakeholders.
2. This year, we are organising the Muis Workplan Seminar online. The theme is "Building a Resilient Community of Success, Together". It is apt that I speak to you on the first day of Ramadan, a month full of blessings. It is a month when we are specially challenged. COVID-19 has tested our community and required us to adjust in many ways. And especially so with the extension of the circuit breaker period to 1 June. This year, we will not be able to pray at our mosques during Ramadan. Come Hari Raya, we will not be able to physically gather for Hari Raya prayers, nor go about our visiting as usual. These are difficult adjustments, especially for the seniors in our community. Yet I believe this period will bring out the best in us. When we look back after this is over, we will see that **we are a resilient community of success**.
3. Allow me to touch on two areas of Muis' work in the coming year. First, building the resilience of our Muslim community. Second, Muis' efforts to secure the future of the community beyond the COVID-19 crisis.

Building our Resilience Against COVID-19

4. Let me first begin with Muis' response to the COVID-19 situation together with our religious community.

Progressive Religious Leadership

5. Since the outset, Muis together with our religious leadership decisively sought practical solutions to pressing community needs. Almost immediately, the Office of the

Mufti and Fatwa Committee issued *irsyads* (religious guidance) and *fatwas* (religious rulings) to guide the community on how it can confidently continue practising Islam in these times, adjusting as situation demands. We should be proud of our religious leaders because they took these decisive steps proactively and therefore earlier than many other countries. Now many have also done the same.

6. Our mosque leaders in response, quickly implemented contingency plans when the difficult decision was made to close our mosques. Our madrasah leaders successfully led the implementation of home-based learning at very short notice. Our Naib Kadis also worked closely with the Registry of Muslim Marriages to put in place precautionary measures for solemnisations such as safe distancing and limiting the number of guests involved. When elevated Safe Distancing was implemented with Circuit Breaker measures, the Registry of Muslim Marriages and the Syariah Court postponed solemnisations and court hearings. These are difficult but necessary moves. They came decisively in response to what we need to prevent community spread.

7. I thank our community and religious leaders for rallying behind Muis and working together with fellow Singaporeans against COVID-19.

Preserving Our Religious Life

8. As importantly, I am glad to see the mutual support between Muis and important partners like yourselves adapt to the situation. Immediately too, resources were mobilised to bring religious programmes and lectures online when our mosques remain closed. Muis ramped up online religious content through **Muslim.SG**, collaborated with the ground-up initiative **Kuliah.SG**, and has introduced a dedicated YouTube channel **SalamSG** for Ramadan. We hope these efforts will enable you to continue your religious practices in Ramadan and beyond with some adjustments despite the COVID-19 situation.

9. Many asatizah have begun to take the opportunity to upskill themselves. They explored dispensing religious guidance to our community via online channels. Masjid Assyafaah is one example where mosque religious officers launched the podcast series “For Heaven’s Sake”. Another example is Masjid Abdul Ghafoor’s Ustaz Abdul

Kadir Hisop who is now reaching out to more jemaah through his online *kuliah* or classes. Well done!

10. We are also grateful that Tata Consultancy Services has donated laptops and broadband connection to madrasah students from less-privileged families. These acts of generosity are truly what the spirit of #SGUnited is about.

Supporting those who are Affected

11. Earlier this month, I convened the SGTeguhBersatu (Resilience in Unity) Taskforce to strengthen the last-mile service delivery of COVID-19 support measures to the Malay/Muslim community. Let me share some updates.

12. Muis has worked with NTUC and MSF to help asatizah benefit from assistance schemes such as the Self-Employed Person Income Relief Scheme (SIRS), Jobs Support Scheme, Temporary Relief Fund (TRF) and COVID-19 Support Grant. Some asatizah have applied for these schemes and I encourage more to do so. PERGAS is helping to validate their work status.

13. We will also do more for lower-income families. Muis will grant an **automatic 6-month extension to all zakat financial assistance beneficiaries**, whose assistance will be expiring within the next 6 months. They will not need to re-apply for assistance.

14. Muis will also exercise greater flexibility in assessing applicants for zakat financial assistance. Muis will assess and approve deserving cases based on need and will be prepared to support these families even if they do not meet the typical per capita income criteria. We will ensure that those are in need will receive the support needed during this difficult period.

Securing the Future of our Community

15. Even as we deal with the present crisis, we must always build up our capabilities for the future. It is indeed during this time when we are not caught up with our routines

that Muis can intensify its efforts in two key areas: strengthening asatizah development, and our social cohesion.

Strengthening Asatizah Development

16. Two months ago, the Committee on Future Asatizah (COFA) headed by SMS Dr Maliki Osman, completed its landmark report and outlined important directions to uplift the asatizah sector, and develop the skills and competencies of our asatizah. This will be a long-term effort that MUIS will partner you on.

17. This effort has taken on a new sense of urgency given the Government's push for workers to leverage the opportunity to upskill during the economic slowdown. This applies as much to the religious sector. For instance, asatizah familiar with technology have been able to more quickly move their classes online and grow their reach than those who did not.

18. Today, I am pleased to announce the **launch of the Career and Competency Framework (CCF) for Asatizah.**

19. The CCF was developed over the past year in close consultation with our mosques and madrasahs. Individual asatizah can now refer to the CCF to learn more about the skills needed for their roles, determine skills gaps and identify suitable training programmes. They can also find out about other roles in the sector and chart their future career pathways in areas such as religious policy and development, education, mosque and community development.

20. The CCF also defines our apex religious leadership positions in our religious institutions – the Mufti, below whom are two Deputy Muftis, Dean of the Muis Academy, Senior President of the Syariah Court and the Registrar for Muslim Marriages. These apex leaders will work with and support the Mufti in leading our asatizah in the different areas of expertise. In future, we would like the Mufti to be appointed from office bearers who have acquired skills and experiences after rotating through these 5 apex positions. The CCF spells out the articulation path to these positions.

21. Muis will conduct online workshops and webinars to share with you more about the CCF and how you can implement it in your organisations.

22. With the CCF in place, I am confident that our returning religious students will have an exciting future if they choose to remain in the religious sector. Our current asatizah will also have more opportunities to broaden their skillsets and contribute more effectively to the community and society.

23. This year, in light of the COVID-19 situation, Muis has identified two key competencies from the CCF that asatizah should build up - digital literacy and counselling skills. I urge asatizah to use their SkillsFuture credits to register for relevant courses. Self-employed asatizah may tap on the Self-Employed Person Training Support Scheme.

24. In total, Muis will **invest \$1.5 million** this year in initiatives to develop and upskill asatizah who are working full time in religious institutions, self-employed and part-timers.

Strengthening Social Cohesion

25. Beyond asatizah development, Muis will continue to intensify its efforts to strengthen social cohesion, which we value deeply as Singaporeans, and *alhamdullilah*, has helped us weather the current crisis.

26. Dear community leaders, I have been very encouraged by the efforts of our community to stand with fellow Singaporeans through the current crisis. This include our mosques' outreach efforts to appreciate our healthcare and frontline workers. The Rahmatan Lil Alamin Foundation (RLAF) collected donations at mosques for the Courage Fund. Many from the Muslim and Christian communities were inspired by the exchange of letters between Mufti and Bishop Terry Kee (President, National Council of Churches Singapore) over the Easter weekend, symbolising the solidarity of all faith communities in facing the crisis. We were also touched by the story of retired cleaner, Mr Zulfikli Atnawi and his four children, who made grocery runs for their rental flat neighbours using their own money and donations from friends.

27. The current crisis must not divide us. Indeed, it must bring out the best within our community. More so in Ramadan. In this regard, I applaud the SGUnited Buka Puasa initiative to bring meals daily to our healthcare heroes and low-income families during the fasting month. This collaboration involves many partners coming together and has garnered support from many Singaporeans regardless of race or religion.

28. I am glad to share that due to overwhelming requests for the meals, we have increased the number of meals catered from 15,000 per day **to 20,000 meals per day**. Correspondingly, **RLAF will also raise its fundraising target from \$2.5 million to \$3.0 million**. I appeal to you to support this meaningful cause by donating generously and sharing this with others in your network

29. These examples reinforce my conviction that our Malay/Muslim community is a Community of Success, or *Masyarakat Gemilang*. Once we overcome COVID-19 together, **Muis will convene the International Conference on Communities of Success (ICCOS)**, to bring religious, political and community leaders to work together on how we can develop successful communities. We look forward to this conference, which will not just benefit the Muslim community in Singapore, but also represents our community's contribution to Muslim communities worldwide.

Seizing the Blessings of Ramadan

30. Allow me to end my speech by wishing every Muslim a blessed Ramadan. Even though we celebrate Ramadan differently this year, we have the precious opportunity in this blessed month to strengthen familial ties. We can deepen our spirituality through our fasting, prayers at home, and acts of charity. Let us stay strong and demonstrate resilience in unity, as we overcome COVID-19 together.

31. Wabillahi Taufiq Walhidayah Wassalamualaikum Wr. Wb.