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SPEECH BY ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR HO PENG KEE, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE (LAW AND HOME AFFAIRS) AND CHAIRMAN OF THE INTER-MINISTRY COMMITTEE ON YOUTH CRIME (IMYC) AT THE YOUTH.NET: DEVELOPING CYBER WELLNESS IN CONJUNCTION WITH ASEAN + 3 SEMINAR ON URBAN YOUTH WORK III ON 26 JULY 2005, 9.00 AM AT ORCHARD HOTEL

Excellencies

Delegates from ASEAN plus 3

Mr Tan Boon Huat, Chief Executive Director, People's Association

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning.

Firstly, let me warmly welcome all our friends from ASEAN plus three to Singapore. I am also happy that many local participants comprising our youth developers, youth workers, teachers and community partners are present at this Youth dot Net Conference titled "Developing Cyber Wellness" in conjunction with "ASEAN plus Three Seminar on Urban Youth Work III".

2 The National Youth Council under the aegis of the Inter-Ministry Committee on Youth Crime or IMYC organised the ASEAN Seminar on Urban Youth Work II in 2002 and the first Youth dot Net Conference in 2003. This year, we have combined both to bring together local and regional participants and experts to share their experiences on guiding our youths in this cyber generation. I anticipate much networking and partnerships to result from this conference.

Internet and its Impact in Asia

3 The Internet is a powerful phenomenon that has reached a worldwide Internet population of more than 900 million from over 50 countries¹. Asia especially is rapidly gathering speed in the international race to be digitally productive and literate. With cheaper computers and devices, developing countries are gaining higher purchasing power and acquiring valuable knowledge on a tool that transcends distance, time and culture. According to the 2004 statistics from the Computer Industry Almanac Inc, China has an estimated 100 million Internet users, Japan 78 million, South Korea 32 million and ASEAN countries aggregate 40 million. The Annual Survey of Infocomm Usage in Households and by Individuals for 2004, conducted by Infocomm Development Authority in Singapore, revealed that there were about 2.4 million Internet users last year.

4 As nations and governments become increasingly 'wired', its youths naturally become more in tune with the cyber world and its hosts of activities. Our youths surf the Internet for information and resources for their schoolwork. They play online games with faceless opponents for their leisure; or to enhance their social life, they may enter chatrooms and journal their thoughts in blogs and make new friends in cyberspace. These are creative and healthy online activities – if done with the right motivations and values, and in moderation. But, as our youths become increasingly cyber-savvy, they are also becoming increasingly cyber-endangered.

The Dark Side of the Internet

5 While the Internet is a valuable resource in our fast-paced society, we must remain vigilant as there are individuals and syndicates out there who abuse its use. In the United States, for example, it is estimated that more than 20,000 images of child pornography are posted on the Internet every week². Apart from these exposures in the Internet, one out of five American children who go online

¹ Figures from the Computer Industry Almanac Inc report. Available at <http://www.clickz.com>

² Figures from the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. Available at <http://www.protectkids.com>

gets asked for sex³. Reports have revealed the growing pockets of international online thieves who feed on the popularity of online video games in order to hijack private accounts for virtual valuables, which they re-sell on auction sites. Game accounts of popular online video games such as Lineage and World of Warcraft are targets of scams feeding an online market worth more than US\$880 million⁴.

6 Not only should online gamers beware of cyber thieves, they should be aware of the risks of cyber addiction. Out of the estimated 40 million youths in China who use the Internet, six million or 15% are suspected to be in need of help against cyber addiction⁵. This growing concern led to the opening of China's first national centre for child Internet addicts in Beijing in April this year. This is an active step of the Chinese government to address cyber addiction issues which, if left unchecked, may lead to increasing violence and anti-social behaviour amongst youths exposed to the violent imageries of online games.

7 Another area of concern is the vulnerability of children and young female users who are especially at risk of exploitation through the Internet. Apart from date rapes resulting from casual chatroom friendships, the Internet is a hot platform where male sexual predators prowl the Net for local and international sexual services.

8 The Internet, with all its resources, has been misused as a tool for flourishing online vices. These individuals and illegal organisations have created a virtual "Community to Trade". As government bodies, educational institutions and social service agencies, our challenge is to create a strong "Community to Prevent and Protect". To turn the tables on cyber crime and to strike a balance between tapping the economic benefits of the Internet and preventing illegal transactions, we need international co-operation and partnerships.

³ Figures quoted from the Internet Herald Tribute, in the article "Will ads spook teen girls off the Net?", The New Paper, Friday 10 June 2005, Pg 20.

⁴ Figures quoted from the article, "Thieves target online gamers", The Straits Times, Saturday 18 June 2005, Pg H5.

⁵ Figures quoted from the article, "SLAVE to online games", The Sunday Times, Sunday 3 April 2005, Pg 38.

Protecting Our Youth and Equipping Them with the Right Knowledge and Usage

9 Apart from preparing our youths to be cyber-savvy and protecting them from becoming victims, we should also be mindful that they are susceptible to the temptations of cyber vices and may end up committing cyber crimes themselves. Once online, a whole new cyber world greets them. Therefore, proper education and programmes need to be in place in society in order to help our youths cope with making informed online decisions, and learning to surf the Internet safely and moderately.

10 More importantly, we want to build a generation of youths who is cyber-empowered, not cyber-enslaved. Thus the need to educate them how to harness the advantages of the Internet and to use it positively and wisely.

11 To develop a strategy to promote cyber wellness in Singapore, the National Internet Advisory Committee formed the Cyber Wellness Task Force in 2002. The Taskforce developed four key values that could form the basis for public education, namely to Embrace the Net and Inspire Others, to Develop Astuteness, to Practise Respect and Responsibility and to Strike a Balance Beyond the Internet.

12 The best deterrence against the potential negative effects of the Internet is to inculcate in our young the right values, ethics and best practices in using the Internet so that they can act responsibly and protect themselves from potential harm.

13 I understand that the Taskforce has also developed cyber wellness programme templates which can be customized and adapted for use by the schools, youth groups and community organizations. I commend the Task force for its efforts in growing a cyber wellness movement in Singapore.

14 In addition, I would like to commend the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports on its new initiative, Youth dot Sg to harness the power of internet for positive youth development.

15 Youth dot Sg is an online portal for youth in Singapore, currently being developed by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth & Sports, together with a project team of volunteers. The Youth Portal will be a first-stop virtual meeting place and resource center for youth to share their views, put their ideas into action and start their own community projects. Youth dot Sg will also feature contributions and articles from our youth. A design contest was launched in May this year to get young Singaporeans to help design the portal. I was informed that more than 130 entries were submitted. Five of the best entries were shortlisted, with the winner subsequently determined by an online poll of young Singaporeans.

16 I encourage all youths to participate in the growth of the Portal as an online community for young Singaporeans. Make it your space and place.

Preventive Efforts of the Inter-Ministry Committee on Youth Crime

17 According to a survey by Synovate this year, 68 percent of young Singaporeans make frequent access to the Internet. This is 18 percent higher than the regional average of 50 percent. The exposure to cyber communities and activities could lead to our youths being more susceptible to becoming victims of cyber crime, as well as being tempted into committing cyber crime.

18 The number of youths warned or prosecuted in Court for Computer Misuse Act (CMA) offences such as hacking, using computers to commit crime and unauthorised use of internet accounts, decreased by 15%, from 27 youths offenders in 2003 to 23 youths offenders last year. In the first 6 months of 2005, there were only 6 such youth offenders. This downward trend in the number of youth offenders involved in cyber crime is heartening. However, cyber crime can affect a disproportionate number of people due to the nature of the Internet. With the increase in Internet connectivity, and with more people going online for business, work and pleasures, criminals will also increasingly leverage on

technology to commit crimes. As such, we must continue our education outreach efforts to proactively engage youths on internet safety to combat cybercrime.

19 Let me share with you some local efforts on cyber risks and other youth-at-risk issues. Crime committed by youths is always a cause for concern. That is why the IMYC was formed ten years ago. The IMYC is a platform, at the national level, to address juvenile delinquency and youth crime. The IMYC coordinates inter-ministry efforts against youth crime through a broad range of measures that encompass areas of prevention and rehabilitation; and looks at the phenomenon of youth crime in a holistic manner - not just law enforcement and punishment. Over the past 10 years, we have seen different types of crime committed by youths, from street gang activities in the 1990s to the recent increasing prevalence of handphone thefts.

20 In the area of cyber risks, the IMYC has been monitoring the increasing influence of the Internet on our youths as early as the 1990s. Recognising the inexorable advance of the cyber lifestyle and its potential dangers, IMYC produced an Internet safety manual for parents, youth workers and educators in 2000. We also initiated Project CRuSH (CyberRisks and where U Seek Help) in 2001, together with a voluntary parent support group, PAGI which stands for Parents' Advisory Group for the Internet and a NGO, TOUCH Youth Services. To date, Project CRuSH has reached out to more than 130,000 students through its 190 Internet Roadshows which promote cyber wellness. About 10 percent or 13,000 of these students have attended Project CRuSH's interactive, close quarters e-mentoring sessions.

21 From our initial efforts with Project Crush, we have widened our outreach to support other good cyber outreach programmes such as MetoYou by Marine Parade Family Service Centre, Project O Level by Students Care Service and eGen by Project 180. These programmes leverage on chatrooms, websites and blogs to introduce e-mentoring and cyber counselling to our youths. Since its operation, MetoYou has reached out to about 21,000 youths through its cyber counselling efforts. The Project O Level website has 1,700 hits to date and the eGen blog caters to about 2,200 regular users. I understand that these partners

have set up exhibitions at the conference. I am sure they can share more about their success stories with you later.

22 Now, let me share with you one inspiring story that is a result of our cyber programmes. When I spoke at the Youth.Net Conference in 2003, I shared about David (not his real name), who was a participant of Project CruSH. David learnt about the ills of cyber pornography during a Project CRuSH lesson “Hard Core Truth on Porn”. With the help of his e-mentor and the determination to change, he overcame his addiction to cyber pornography.

23 Today, David is an e-mentor in Project CRuSH, and has reached out to more than 700 youths through online forums and shared his story with other youths facing the same problem.

24 It is encouraging to hear such success stories, but really, success does not happen overnight. These youths have come a long way with much help from youth workers, teachers and their families. Indeed, the role of the community cannot be emphasised more. Parents – please get to know about the Internet so that you can stay relevant to your children’s cyber activities. Teachers – please stay vigilant in detecting signs of cyber addiction or other cyber vices amongst your students. Youth workers – please explore more creative cyber platforms to reach out to our youths. I am confident we will see our combined efforts yield greater fruit.

New Initiatives and Resources

25 To further promote cyber wellness in the community, IMYC is collaborating with the Cyber Wellness Task Force to offer seed funding to schools to support youth initiated projects that harness the Internet in an innovative and inspiring manner so as to enrich the lives of our youths so that they make a difference to the community. We hope to build a strong support network that continuously promotes a positive cyber environment.

26 In addition, IMYC, together with our conference organisers will also be producing a resource guide to promote cyber wellness, titled “The Offline Guide

for the Online Generation – a Cyber Wellness Resource”. The guide will outline youth online trends, dangers on the Internet, organisations that promote cyber wellness in Singapore, existing cyber programmes and resources on the Internet, as well as tips for youth workers/parents/educators on dangers on the Net. This guide will be made available in October this year to the schools and the social service sector. Each of you will also receive a copy then.

Support for Organisation and Community

27 Today, I am heartened to see the support and sponsorship of the Media Development Authority and the National Internet Advisory Committee, as well as the partnership of our co-organisers, TOUCH Youth Services and the Parents Advisory Group for the Internet.

28 With their keen involvement, we are able to present an exciting line-up of international and local speakers at today’s conference. I believe that the speakers’ extensive knowledge of the global and local Internet scene and its impact on youths will enlighten us on how to promote, develop and enhance cyber wellness amongst our youths. I would like to thank Dr Rachel O’Connell from the University of Central Lancashire, United Kingdom, Professor Noriyoshi Takemura from Toin University of Yokohama, Japan, and our local speakers and facilitators for participating in this conference.

29 On this note, I wish everyone a fruitful day ahead. I am excited about the potential networks and partnerships that this conference can generate. Let us keep up the good work and learn from one another’s experiences and expertise.

30 Thank you
