

SPEECH BY ASSOC PROF HO PENG KEE, MINISTER OF STATE FOR LAW & HOME AFFAIRS, AT THE APPOINTMENT CEREMONY OF TEACHERS AS HONORARY VOLUNTEER SPECIAL CONSTABULARY SENIOR OFFICERS ON 26 JAN 1999 AT 2.30 PM AT SENIOR POLICE OFFICERS' MESS (SPOM)

Commissioner of Police,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to be here this afternoon to present appointment certificates to 29 teachers who will be appointed Honorary Volunteer Special Constabulary (VSC) Senior Officers. You are the third batch to be appointed since the scheme was launched in July 1997.

2 Two officers are from the Assumption Vocational Institute and Queenstown Vocational Training Centre. This is significant. These two teacher-officers represent the Honorary VSC scheme's first link-up with Vocational Training Centres, a component of the Institute of Technical Education. With today's 29 new officers, there are a total of 58 teachers appointed as Honorary VSC officers.

Survey of the Honorary VSC scheme

3 In November last year, the Police and the Ministry of Education (MOE) surveyed students from the pioneer batch of schools. More than 850 students were surveyed.

4 88% of them felt that their schools have become safer since their teachers were appointed Honorary VSC officers. 94% of them were aware that the Honorary VSC officers had Police powers to arrest anyone who broke the law. They felt that this would definitely deter students from committing crimes or getting involved in gang activities in and around the school.

5 92% of the students also felt that they could turn to the Honorary VSC officers for advice. This means that these officers not only deter potential troublemakers, they also foster closer relationships between the teachers and the students. This will, in the long run, help to reduce the problem of delinquency amongst students.

6 The findings of the survey are very encouraging. It shows that the students appreciate the scheme. It has their support, reaffirming our belief that the scheme should be extended to more schools.

Juvenile crime in 1998

7 Let me now give you a brief update on the juvenile crime situation. In 1998, 2,242 juveniles were arrested, an increase of 95 (or 4.4%) compared to the 2,147 juveniles arrested in 1997. The number of student juveniles arrested in 1998 also increased, from 1,749 in 1997 to 1,925 last year. The increases are because more juveniles and students were arrested for shoplifting.

8 The number of juveniles arrested for shoplifting rose 40%, from 878 in 1997 to 1,240 in 1998. More than a quarter of the 1998 cases involved the shoplifting of Yo-Yos.

9 Police has been working with the Singapore Retailers' Association to address the rise in youth shoplifting. Some of these efforts are beginning to bear fruit. Fewer juveniles were arrested in recent months for shoplifting. Nevertheless, Police and the schools will continue to press on to bring the numbers down further. Shoplifting by youths is not a simple, straightforward law and order phenomenon. It encompasses complex social factors which bear further study. I have asked the Inter-Ministry Committee on Youth Crime or IMYC to do this. For example, we cannot just generalise that a higher incidence of shoplifting has a direct correlation with the depressed economic situation. Instead, the underlying reasons may stem from the attitudes and values of these youths. Whilst immediate measures such as greater vigilance by shopkeepers can bring the numbers down, we should address the problem at source.

10 What is heartwarming is that the number of juveniles arrested for rioting, unlawful assembly and serious assault cases¹ has continued to decline. This was an area of concern which we had focussed on the last few years. It fell by almost half (46%) to 157 juveniles in 1998 compared to 289 in 1997. In particular, the number of juveniles arrested for rioting fell to 89 in 1998, down by 42% from 154 in 1997. The decline indicates that the many measures IMYC agencies had introduced and resolutely implemented, with IMYC's co-ordination, are making a positive impact.

11 For the wider group of youths aged 7 to 19, the total number arrested in 1998 was 4,396, a marginal decrease of 0.4% compared to 4,412 in 1997. As in the case of the juveniles, the number of youths arrested for theft and property-related offences increased, while those arrested for rioting, unlawful assembly and serious assault declined. For example, the number of youths arrested for rioting in 1998 was 291, down by almost half compared to 539 in 1997. Nevertheless, we will continue to press on with our preventive measures against rioting, working with relevant agencies, including disseminating information on the root causes and psychographics of youth gangs to parents, teachers and youth workers.

¹ Serious assault cases refer to voluntarily causing hurt with dangerous weapons, voluntarily causing grievous hurt (VCGH), VCGH with dangerous weapons (Section 324 to 326 of the Penal Code)

IMYC Programmes for Schools

12 IMYC has always adopted a comprehensive approach to tackle youth crime problems with preventive, developmental and rehabilitative measures. Hence, whilst youth crime statistics are a good short-term indication of success, non-statistical indications are important too. The close working relationship amongst relevant agencies is a good indicator. For longer term results, the agencies must continue working together. Greater synergy will be achieved through closer networking amongst government agencies, schools, community organisations, VWOs and families. This way, we can address new problems that may surface with appropriate measures. Also, existing measures can be fine-tuned.

13 The Honorary VSC scheme - one of many programmes in our multi-pronged approach to managing youth crimes- strengthens links between the schools and Police. It helps keep youth crimes and youth-gang influence away from our schools. IMYC will organise another networking seminar in March this year. The seminar will update principals and teachers on the progress of current IMYC programmes as well as brief them on new programmes. They will then more confidently tap these resources in their front-line efforts to curb delinquency in their schools.

Roles of Honorary VSC Officers

14 I congratulate the 29 teachers who will be appointed Honorary VSC officers today. As Honorary VSC officers, you play three key roles.

15 First, your appointment symbolises authority in your schools and enhances your position as a key person in maintaining school discipline. Secondly, you play the role of liaison officer between your respective schools and the Police. Finally, you assume the position of advisors on law and order matters in your schools.

16 I am confident that you will make a significant contribution to the overall management of the youth crime situation in Singapore. Thank you for coming forward to serve. I wish you every success in your new responsibilities as Honorary VSC officers.