**REMARKS ON COVID-19**

**UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW OF SINGAPORE**

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Madam President,

My name is Dr Lyn James, and I am the Director of the International Cooperation Division at the Ministry of Health. I will speak about the impact of COVID-19 on Singapore and our response.

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a particularly serious threat to Singapore. With the third highest population density in the world and one of the fastest ageing populations in Asia, there was a high risk of the virus spreading out of control and claiming many lives.

Like many countries, we had to take difficult decisions to safeguard public health. We closed our borders last March to most transit and short-term visitors, and introduced a lockdown, or what we called a “circuit breaker”, from April to June 2020. During this period, we closed workplaces and non-essential shops. Schools were closed for a month. We also introduced strict distancing measures and mask-wearing requirements.

Health Measures

In terms of health measures, to support our residents, we covered the hospital bills of COVID-19 patients in public hospitals, including for intensive care. This continues to apply for all long-term residents of Singapore, whether they are citizens or not, who have remained in the country since the outbreak of the pandemic.

We are fortunate to have also started rolling out our national vaccination strategy, which prioritises high-risk and vulnerable groups, including migrant workers. In March this year, we began vaccinating migrant workers living in dormitories. By the end of April, 42,000 migrant workers were fully vaccinated.

Socio-Economic Measures

Beyond public health, the socio-economic impact of the pandemic has also been severe. Singapore is a major transit and transhipment hub. Our trade is more than three times the value of our GDP. During the pandemic, we suffered the worst recession in our history.

We introduced a range of measures and an additional close to US$75 billion in health, welfare, and stimulus spending. This was the largest fiscal intervention in our history, equivalent to 20% of our GDP.

Most of our measures targeted vulnerable groups such as lower to middle income families, children, the elderly, migrant workers, and those at risk of domestic violence. Let me briefly touch on them.

*Lower to Middle Income Families*

We stepped up measures to keep companies afloat and preserve jobs. We introduced grants and programmes to co-fund wages and help lower to middle-income Singaporeans who lost their jobs or suffered substantial loss of income.

*Victims of Domestic Violence*

To ensure that those at risk of domestic violence could get ready support, social services and legal recourse remained available during our lockdown. The police proactively referred victims at higher risk of further domestic violence to social service agencies for assistance. They contacted those victims thereafter to check if they required further help.

*Education*

In line with SDG 4 on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education, Singapore worked to ensure that all children continued to have unimpeded access to education despite the challenges posed by COVID-19.

When schools were closed last April, we implemented Home-Based Learning for all. Recognising that not all children have the same level of access to technology, laptops, tablets and internet-enabling devices were loaned to students who needed them. Lower income households could apply for subsidised computers and broadband. We catered for exceptional cases, such as children whose parents were essential workers and unable to make alternative care arrangements, by allowing them to continue in-person learning in school.

Madam President,

Accuracy of Information

The rampant spread of misinformation, or the “infodemic” as described by the WHO, has challenged pandemic responses around the world. To counter this, Singapore used multiple communication channels to ensure that our people had easy access to accurate, timely, and reliable information. For instance, we have provided daily updates via an official Government WhatsApp channel on the number of COVID-19 cases, the number of completed vaccinations, and the latest Government measures. Our Prime Minister and other Ministers also regularly addressed the public. Accurate information is key to public participation in the collective response to countering the pandemic.

We actively countered the spread of false information on the pandemic through public clarifications and the judicious use of the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA). My colleague from the Ministry of Law will elaborate on this later.

Conclusion

As with all countries, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented novel challenges and tested our society, economy and public institutions. We will continue to learn from our experiences and shape our responses to ensure that no one in Singapore is left behind in our recovery. Thank you.

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