

SPEECH BY MR LEE YOCK SUAN, MINISTER FOR INFORMATION AND THE ARTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT, AT THE OPENING OF MALAY LANGUAGE MONTH ON SATURDAY 29 JULY 2000 AT 4.00 PM AT SINGGAHSANA HALL, GEYLANG SERAI MALAY VILLAGE

I am happy to be here to join you this afternoon in launching the Malay Language Month. First launched in 1988, it is a fine example of the efforts taken by the Malay community to promote and strengthen its heritage, especially the use of the Malay Language.

The Malay Language Month comes at an important time. As we enter the new Millennium, rapid changes are taking place not just in Singapore, but throughout the world. Having survived the Asian financial crisis, we are all focusing our attention on Cyberspace and the Knowledge-Based Economy (KBE). Last December, the Malay/Muslim Community launched its KBE Movement. In cyberspace, the Internet has introduced many changes and revolutionized the way we work, live and play.

Currently, most of the content on the World-Wide Web, perhaps 80%, is in English. This is an advantage for English-speaking countries and facilitates the increasing use of English as a common international language. It is also an advantage for most Singaporeans who have learnt English in school.

Non-English speaking countries such as France, China and Japan have reacted vigorously to promote their own languages in all arenas. They have set up Internet networks in their own languages, whilst improving their capability to tap English content on the Internet. Some analysts have projected that the proportion of non-English Internet content will increase to 50% by 2003, but this remains to be seen.

The Malay language is the lingua franca for over 250 million people mainly living in this region and the potential of Malay Internet is sizeable. Malay Internet will help you to stay connected with the Malay-speaking world.

Here our bilingual policy has provided Malay Singaporeans with a distinct advantage. Proficiency in the English language has enabled access to all the benefits of the Internet which is dominated by English-language content. At the same time, their mastery of the Malay language and the romanised Malay script has enabled them to communicate easily in Malay with members of their own community. Unlike Chinese, Japanese or Tamil, there is no need for separate software to access romanised Malay Internet.

In the same way that Singapore has introduced Tamil to the World-Wide Web, Singaporeans can also play a role in putting Malay on the Internet. Indeed, there are already efforts to establish a Malay-language network on Internet. It will help to reach out to those viewers in Singapore and the region who are only conversant in Malay. To succeed it must involve not only Malay language experts, but also many others from all walks of life who can contribute towards enriching its content. Bilingual Malay Internet surfers can also serve as a bridge between the English-language Internet world and the Malay-language Internet network when it comes to being.

In the knowledge-based economy, we need to get as many Singaporeans as possible involved and able to ride the Internet wave so that no one is left behind. Most Singaporeans who are literate in English will have no difficulty accessing the Internet. Our communities will also maintain links with their mother tongues so that they can access the Internet in their languages and contribute to their development as well.

I am well aware of the concerns of many Malay Singaporean parents over the influence of foreign cultures, pornography and lifestyles conveyed through the Internet. This is a concern of all communities in Singapore. It is important that the community find ways of providing the cultural ballast and supportive environment for internet to grow. Malay parents must complement the effort and help to advise and persuade their children away from the negative influences pushed through the internet. As many older-generation Malay parents are not internet-literate or comfortable in English, the community could find ways of helping them to play their roles effectively.

I commend the organisers for their efforts to promote the Malay language. As you are aware, much needs to be done. The community must continue to produce and encourage a pool of cultural leaders, language experts, writers, poets and teachers who can help to maintain the standards of the language and pass them on to successive generations. You must find ways of enhancing the value of the language in the marketplace. If and when advertisers believe that they can reach their consumers in this region via the language, it will raise the status of the Malay language. Groups involved in teaching and research should exploit modern technology by producing software to assist in the teaching and learning of the language.

The Malay Language Month Committee 2000 has been working tirelessly with many other Malay organisations to organize a range of events for the month. I wish you every success in achieving your objective to promote the Malay language and culture.
