

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT BY PRIME MINISTER LEE HSIEN LOONG IN PARLIAMENT ON 22 APRIL 2008

1. Mr Speaker Sir, Mas Selamat's escape has raised the question of the Government's response when major lapses occur, not just the specific actions we take, but also the broader issue of Government responsibility and accountability. This is a question which many Singaporeans have raised, and which Ms Sylvia Lim has asked in a Parliamentary question. DPM Wong Kan Seng explained at length yesterday what the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has done in the case of Mas Selamat. Let me now present the Government's overall approach, and then give my views on the Mas Selamat case.

2. The Government's aim is to try our best to do things right the first time. This means planning well ahead for the future, anticipating problems, preparing for contingencies, and so avoiding major lapses as far as possible. We put the best people we can find in charge at every level in Government and the public service, and hold them responsible for delivering performance and results.

3. But despite our best efforts, we know that things do go wrong from time to time. Officers are human, and will make mistakes. Plans go wrong in implementation, the unexpected catches us by surprise, and organisations get set in their ways and fail to anticipate problems. To achieve one overriding goal, we accept trade-offs and compromises for other desired results and fall short. As our systems and challenges become more complex, inevitably from time to time there will be bad outcomes, and occasionally even serious lapses.

4. If and when something goes wrong, we have to deal with it decisively and effectively. Our first priority is to respond to the immediate crisis, and then to identify shortcomings and put them right. We must also take steps to ensure that the problem does not recur. This means not just quick fixes, but also where necessary fundamental changes to systems and organisations to address deeper problems revealed by the lapse.

5. But at the same time, we should not over-react to one bad incident. If we go overboard in trying to solve one problem, the chances are we will inadvertently commit other mistakes which we will regret later. For example, encumbering an organisation with unwieldy rules and processes may look good on paper, but in practice will simply generate a false sense of security, while hindering the organisation from functioning efficiently and achieve its goals.

6. Besides corrective measures, we will give as full a public accounting as possible, especially if it is a major lapse. Singaporeans need to know what went wrong, and what the Government will do to fix things.

7. Having done all that, we have to establish who specifically are responsible for the lapse, and what disciplinary actions should be taken. Several questions will have to be addressed:

- a. Was it a correct decision which turned out badly, because of external factors that could not have been foreseen?
- b. Was it an honest mistake, something that happened despite the best efforts of the officers involved?
- c. Was there negligence or incompetence on the part of the officers?
- d. Was there criminal misconduct?

- e. Was the cause localised mistakes by a few persons, or was it deeper: wrong institutional mindsets, or systemic weaknesses in the organisation?

8. These issues have to be investigated by departmental inquiries, committees of inquiry, or commissions of inquiry, or (where there is possibly criminal misconduct) by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID). Based on the findings, we will then allocate responsibility impartially and objectively. We will not just blame the officers directly involved. Those with supervisory oversight, or who are responsible for flawed systems, will also be held to account.

9. The Minister is ultimately accountable for the policies and operations of his Ministry. But this does not mean that if a lapse occurs down the line, every level in the chain of command, up to and including the Minister should automatically be punished or removed. Based on the facts, we have to decide who fell short in performing his duties, and what is the appropriate disciplinary action for each officer involved. We also have to follow due process, giving officers the chance to defend themselves. Otherwise we will demoralise the organisation and discourage officers from taking initiatives or responsibility, for fear of being punished for making mistakes.

10. This same principle of responsibility and accountability also applies to Ministers. It is the Prime Minister's duty to decide how each Minister has performed in his portfolio. Hence when a lapse happens, I will ask the same questions of the Minister – how is he involved in the matter? Has he been incompetent or negligent? Most serious of all, is there a question of integrity? If so, he has to go, even if the actual incident is minor. I will also ask: is the Minister able to put things right, or does the situation call for a new pair of hands, not encumbered by what went before, to take charge and make a fresh start? Of course the Prime Minister himself is accountable too, to Parliament and ultimately to the electorate.

11. However, we should not encourage a culture where officials and Ministers resign whenever something goes wrong on their watch, regardless of whether or not they are actually to blame. That would be the easy way out. It may temporarily appease an angry public, but it will not fundamentally solve the problem.

12. The basic issue is whether the person is culpable. If so, we must act against him, however senior his position. But if he is not at fault, then we must have the moral courage to state so, and support him. This way, everybody within the organisation can be confident that when something goes wrong, they will not be sacrificed for political expediency.

13. This is what the Government has done in the Mas Selamat incident. When Mas Selamat escaped, MHA's immediate response was to try to track him down. The Ministry alerted the public within hours. DPM Wong updated Parliament the very next day, and apologised for the lapse. He also convened a Committee of Inquiry (COI) to find out the reasons Mas Selamat was able to escape. In parallel, CID launched an investigation.

14. Six weeks after the event, the COI has done a thorough investigation, and reported its findings and recommendations. CID has also completed its investigation and found no evidence of collusion. Nevertheless, arising from the COI findings, MHA has decided to replace the officers at the Whitley Road Detention Centre (WRDC) responsible for Mas Selamat's escape, and to take disciplinary action against them, including not just the junior officers but also the supervisory and management levels.

15. The Cabinet has been briefed on this. I have gone through the COI report myself, and discussed the matter carefully with DPM Wong and other Cabinet members. I am satisfied that the Ministry has taken the correct remedial and disciplinary action, and that the Minister

and top management were not to blame for what has happened. DPM Wong Kan Seng as the Minister and the Director of ISD both continue to have my full confidence.

16. We must admit our mistakes openly and honestly, put them right, and act against those who have been culpable. But the last thing we need is a witch-hunt which would damage and demoralise our intelligence and security agencies.

17. Could Mas Selamat's escape been prevented? Of course. It should never have happened. The COI has listed out the specific lapses: the toilet window unbarred, the guards allowing Mas Selamat out of their line of sight, the weaknesses in the fencing, and the unclear lines of command over security. But the basic problem was the mindset of those running the WRDC. Because ISD's focus was on gathering intelligence and rehabilitating detainees, the WRDC regime and physical security were different from Changi prison. And because past detainees like the Communist sympathisers were not likely to try to escape, and there had never been an escape from ISD detention, even when Mas Selamat failed to emerge from the toilet, the guards thought that he might have collapsed inside the toilet, rather than that he might have run away! ISD knew that Mas Selamat was a high risk detainee, and the Superintendent of WRDC had warned his staff to watch him closely, but unfortunately the Superintendent and his staff still let their guard down, and allowed complacency to set in.

18. The MHA Minister and Director ISD will now have to rectify all the operational weaknesses identified by the COI, and correct the underlying mindsets which led to these specific lapses. But let us see things in perspective. ISD is our lead agency fighting against terrorism. It has done sterling work keeping Singapore safe. ISD has won international respect for its vigilance and competence in detecting and detaining the JI terrorists before they could set off truck bombs in Singapore and destroy lives and property. Many security agencies from the US and Europe have come to compare experiences with ISD and study our methods to combat Islamist extremism. These agencies have been especially impressed by our success in winning the support of our Muslim community for the war against terrorism, and by the religious rehabilitation efforts of our ulamas to try to guide the detainees back onto the right path. These achievements are the result of years of patient effort. They reflect the professional competence of the leadership of the ISD and the senior officers of MHA working under DPM Wong Kan Seng. This is why I have confidence in them.

19. ISD officers understand more than anyone else the seriousness of Mas Selamat's escape, and its implications for Singapore's security. They will recover from this setback, press on with their mission, and rebuild public confidence in them. I ask Singaporeans to continue giving them your full support, as you have done in the hunt for Mas Selamat.

20. Mr Speaker Sir, we demand high standards of integrity and performance from every public servant, MP and office-holder. We assess them rigorously and objectively, and apply disciplinary rules fairly and impartially to all. This is what Singaporeans expect from their Government. And this is what we have delivered and will continually strive to achieve.

21. This trust between the Government and the people is crucial. Hence we have always been honest and forthright with Singaporeans when something goes wrong. We will learn from the escape of Mas Selamat and recover from it. Let us pull together, grow from this experience, and emerge stronger from this.