

Minister for Defence Dr Ng Eng Hen's 2021 Total Defence Day Message

 **SPEECHES** | 14 Feb 2021 18:00 (GMT+8)

The fight against the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 revealed the power of Total Defence. When citizens were united in purpose and actions against a common enemy for Total Defence, the damage from viral outbreaks in those countries was moderated. In stark contrast, death and destruction ensued when the population was fractured, each concerned more with self-interest. As in a war, the virus disrupted nearly all forms of normal activity and curtailed individual liberties. Lives and livelihoods were at stake if that country was overwhelmed. The global toll has been as great as any previous World Wars – at latest count, over 2 million people have died from the disease.

As we commemorate Total Defence, we ask ourselves, did Singapore pass the test against COVID-19? I say with gratitude a resounding yes. Singapore did not have it easy when the pandemic broke out into the migrant worker community, with tens of thousands affected. Many workers especially in hard hit sectors like travel and hospitality lost income or jobs entirely. Yet when the circuit breaker and other restrictions were imposed, Singaporeans rallied together and put the interest of Singapore before self. The result was clear for everyone to see – that Total Defence in action saves lives and jobs.

While infections soared in countries around the world, the spread within our community was contained. Our hospitals were not overwhelmed and most importantly, deaths were kept down. Our health care workers including those within the SAF put themselves at risk and took care of those infected while protecting themselves. Economic agencies in MTI and EDB kept supply chains intact so that we did not face shortages of food or other essentials. They also pre-ordered vaccines, so that we are among the first to start mass vaccinations. Security forces within the SAF and the Home Team did not let down their guard. Law and order were maintained and our key installations protected. Businesses complied with restrictions imposed, and while many suffered a drop in revenue initially, recovered when volumes pick up. Companies quickly put in plans for staff to work from homes in split teams for business continuity. Many community groups spurred into action spontaneously whether to sew masks or to help the vulnerable and encourage compliance. Youths delivered food and essentials to the elderly and those under quarantine, and set up translation websites to help medical teams treating migrant workers. Retired doctors and nurses came back to help, and full-time national servicemen extended their service to fight against this pandemic.

That cohesion and compliance allowed us to celebrate national events like the National Day and New Year without further outbreaks. It also ensured that we could open our borders early to resume global trade and commerce which are essential to Singapore's economy.

Just as important as what Singaporeans did in response, what did not occur was as crucial – no specific groups victimised or blamed, no fault lines split open. We dealt with COVID-19 as one people, regardless of race, language or nationality in Singapore. The positive impact is evident, with one of the lowest mortality rates in the world, and where retrenchments did not balloon. Our economy is on the mend and mass vaccinations have begun. It will take some more time for full recovery to a new normal but the beginning of this end is in sight.

In many years past, we commemorated Total Defence more as a concept and exhortation when the going was good and smooth. There is a silver lining to the terrible COVID year that just ended. It reaffirmed that Total Defence is a living concept, vital and necessary to ensure our collective well-being and central to Singapore's ability to overcome grave challenges. If Total Defence springs into action, as it did against COVID-19, then we can face the future, come what may, with optimism and hope. We can be assured that with Total Defence, not only can Singapore survive each crisis but will emerge stronger and with Singaporeans more united. This is the power of Total Defence.

