January 20, 2015

MFA Press Statement: Visit of Minister of State in The Prime Minister’s Office and Ministry Of Culture, Community and Youth, Sam Tan to Norway, 18 to 22 January 2015

Minister of State Sam Tan met Norwegian Minister for Foreign Affairs Mr Børge Brende on 19 January 2015, and presented the latter with a copy of Professor Tan Tai Yong’s “Maritime Heritage of Singapore”. Photo credit: MFA

Minister of State in the Prime Minister’s Office and the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth Mr Sam Tan was in Tromsø, Norway to attend the 9th Arctic Frontiers conference on 19 January 2015. He delivered a speech titled: “State of the Arctic – Singapore’s Perspective”. The event was attended by about 877 registered participants from 37 countries. The text of Mr Tan’s speech is appended.

On the sidelines of the conference, Mr Tan called on Norwegian Minister for Foreign Affairs Mr Børge Brende. They reaffirmed the good relations between Singapore and Norway, and had a frank exchange of views on regional developments. Mr Tan also met United States Special Representative for the Arctic Admiral Robert J. Papp Jr. to discuss possible areas of cooperation between Singapore and the United States during the latter’s Chairmanship of the Arctic Council from 2015 to 2017. In addition, Mr Tan met a Singaporean student, Mr Ian Lee, who is taking part in the University of the Arctic (UArctic) Student Ambassadors Programme at the University of Tromsø.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Singapore

20 January 2015

Speech by Minister of State in the Prime Minister’s Office and the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth Sam Tan Chin Siong at the 9th Arctic Frontiers Conference, Tromsø, Norway, 19 January 2015

http://www.mfa.gov.sg/content/mfa/media_centre/press_room/pr/2015/2...
State of the Arctic – Singapore’s Perspective

His Excellency Børge Brende, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Norway,

Her Excellency Aili Keskitalo, President of Sami Parliament in Norway,

Distinguished participants

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning. It is a great pleasure for me to join you here in Tromsø, the gateway to the Arctic. I would like at the outset to thank Foreign Minister Brende and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Norway for inviting Singapore to the 9th Arctic Frontiers Conference (AFC).

I would also like to congratulate the Arctic Frontiers for its continuing success in bringing together stakeholders in three key sectors - policy, business and science – to discuss issues concerning the Arctic today. Given the complexity of both challenges and opportunities that the region presents today, it is right that you have adopted not only an international, but also an interdisciplinary approach to discussing these issues. It was a privilege to hear all the distinguished keynote speakers before me. I have indeed benefitted much from their insights.

This year’s theme, “Climate and Energy”, has considerable significance for the Arctic. The distinguished speakers this morning have already shared with us their perspectives about the changes taking place in the Arctic and their impact on the rest of the world. It is clear that the Arctic is the canary of the mine in terms of climate change. It is warming at more than double the rate compared to the rest of the world. This brings about profound environmental and ecological changes in the Arctic. The decline in the population of polar bears has quite rightly captured the world’s attention, but it is just the tip of the iceberg. The melting and the contraction of the ice in the Arctic will have global impact. And Singapore, although we are far from the Arctic, will not be spared from it.

Singapore

Singapore is a small low-lying island-state just one degree north of the equator. It lies 7,266 km from the Arctic Circle. As an eco-system, the Arctic cannot be more different than Singapore. However, we have learnt that whatever happens in each region will have a profound impact on the other. We in Singapore have developed a keen awareness of climate change and environmental risks. Singapore lies at the crossroads of the busiest sea lanes of communications in the world – the Straits of Malacca and Singapore and the South China Sea. With almost 5.5 million people live on just 714 sq km of land – roughly about twice the surface area of Lake Mjøsa, the largest lake in Norway, Singapore is a densely-built city-state with about 7,700 people per sq km.

Though undoubtedly less pronounced in effect than in the Arctic, climate change does affect Singapore. We are perennially faced with the threat of sea level rise. Recently, a new study by scientists showed that the sea-level rise acceleration over the past century had been greater than estimated previously. This has caught my attention. We will be celebrating our 50th year of independence this year, if we do nothing, we might have to celebrate our 100th year of independence underwater. Jokes aside, to pre-empt the projected rise in sea levels in Southeast Asia by 40cm to 60cm this century, we have constructed walls and stone embankments covering 70-80% of Singapore’s coastline to protect our coastal areas from erosion. The rest are natural areas such as beaches and mangroves. Singapore has also had to contend with anomalous weather patterns that are increasingly unpredictable. Higher-than-average rainfall caused flash floods in various parts of the island in recent years. At the other extreme, a month-long dry spell in January last year was the worst we experienced in five decades. The weather variability affects our capacity to manage water resources, preserve biodiversity and greenery, and maintain public health.

We are doing all we can to address climate change at home and to meet our international commitments to reduce carbon
emissions. We have ongoing measures to reduce emissions to 7-11% below our business-as-usual (BAU) level by 2020. If there is a legally binding global agreement on climate change, we will further reduce our emissions to 16% below our BAU level by 2020. We have been pursuing environmentally-responsible development well before this became the accepted wisdom globally. Through our efforts, Singapore generates relatively low levels of carbon emissions per dollar GDP, ranking 113th out of 140 countries.

7 We are also exploring alternative energy sources, despite having limited access to feasible sources of renewable energy as a small country with land and resource constraints. For example, we are looking to raise adoption of solar power to 350 megawatts, peak (MWp) by 2020, and will continue to study other energy options. In addition to investing in R&D to build our clean energy capabilities, we have also commissioned technology roadmaps on Solar Photovoltaics and Carbon Capture Storage and Utilisation.

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

8 Notwithstanding our efforts at home, Singapore is conscious that we only account for less than 0.2% of annual global carbon emissions. We are also conscious that climate change can only be effectively addressed at the global level. In that connection, the urgency of the need for global action to tackle climate change is more evident in the Arctic than in any other part of the world. We believe that it is in our vital interest first to understand the Arctic better, and subsequently to contribute what we can to efforts of the countries and communities in the Arctic towards the preservation and responsible development of this fragile region.

Singapore-Norway Cooperation in Climate Change and the Arctic

9 I am pleased to say that Norway and Singapore enjoy a close partnership at international climate change negotiations. Most recently, at the Lima conference, our two Environment Ministers, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan and Ms Tine Sundtoft, were invited by the Peruvian Presidency to facilitate political consultations. Our efforts helped produce the consensus to adopt the “Lima Call for Climate Action”. Singapore and Norway have also jointly organised training courses for participants from South Asia and Southeast Asia under the Singapore-Norway Third Country Training Programme framework. Our courses, including those on water management, climate change, and renewable energy, have been well-received by the participants.

10 Vis-à-vis the Arctic, Norway was the first Arctic state to have recognised Singapore’s capacity to contribute to the developments in the Arctic given our common interests as fellow maritime and shipping nations. Norway supported Singapore’s application for observer status in the Arctic Council - even when the relevance of a small tropical city-state halfway across the globe for the frozen world that is the Arctic was not evident. After Singapore was granted observer status in the Arctic Council in May 2013, Norway worked with Singapore to bring the dialogue on the Arctic to the tropics. The Norway-Singapore Arctic Symposium that was held in Singapore in March 2014 achieved much in enhancing awareness about the developments in the Arctic in our part of the world. We look forward to further opportunities to work with Norway promote understanding of the developments in the region.

Shipping

Ladies and Gentlemen

11 Like Norway, Singapore is also committed to sustainable development in the Arctic, and recognises that complex demands have to be balanced to meet this end. It is essential to ensure the safe and secure passage of vessels in the Arctic. At the same time, we must balance this with adequate safeguards in place to protect the Arctic environment and the indigenous communities whose homes and livelihoods depend on it. Given the global nature of shipping, an inclusive approach involving all the key stakeholders is the way forward. As an active member of the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) Council, Singapore has contributed to the IMO’s work in enhancing environmental protection and navigational safety.
12 Singapore has been part of the IMO’s efforts to limit and reduce CO2 emissions from international shipping. In 2011, the IMO adopted technical measures for new ships and operational reduction measures for all ships. This marked the first time that a mandatory global regime for CO2 emission reduction for an entire industry sector had been introduced. I am happy to note that the IMO’s efforts to address CO2 emissions from shipping have been effective. The Third IMO Greenhouse Gas Study in 2014 reported an absolute reduction in CO2 volumes emitted by shipping, from 2.8% of total global CO2 emissions in 2007 to 2.2% in 2012.

13 Singapore has also participated actively in the discussions on the Polar Code at the IMO. We will continue to work with other stakeholders towards the smooth conclusion of the Code. The Code covers the full range of matters relevant to ships operating in the waters surrounding the two poles, from design to search and rescue, and environmental protection. It establishes an international rules-based framework for Arctic shipping while ensuring the safety of life at sea and the sustainability of the polar environments. For instance, the mandatory provision in Part II-A of the Code prohibits the discharge of oil or oily mixtures, and noxious liquids containing such substances, in Arctic waters. It is hence an essential agreement that will ensure safe and sustainable shipping in the Arctic.

Cooperation with the Arctic Indigenous Communities

14 Even as we work at the policy and technical levels, we deeply appreciate the importance of engaging Arctic stakeholders at the people-to-people level. During my visits to the Arctic, I have learnt much from the Arctic indigenous peoples. They have taught me the importance of treasuring nature and their traditional way of life in the Arctic. One good example is the importance of reindeer herding to the Sami people. To this end, I will be visiting the Sami capital of Karasjok, after Tromsø, to learn more from the Saami people and their way of life. I have also had the honour of welcoming leaders and representatives of organisations representing the Arctic indigenous communities to Singapore on two study visits. These visits were platforms for meaningful exchanges on topics such as sustainable development and strategies on environmental protection. To support more meaningful interactions between Singapore and the indigenous communities, we have launched the “Singapore-Arctic Council Permanent Participants Cooperation Programme” for Arctic indigenous peoples to visit Singapore for scholarships and study visits.

Conclusion

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

15 In my visits to the Arctic, I have learnt that the Arctic is not so far remote from Singapore as what most people may think. In fact, I have met a number of Singaporeans living in the Arctic, including in Whitehorse, Canada and Akureyri, Iceland. Recently, a television programme in Singapore featured a Singaporean lady Ms Zoe Ho, who has been staying in Inuvik, in the Northwest Territories of Canada, since 2005. I would not be surprised if there are more Singaporeans living in the Arctic.

16 We can all agree that the Arctic is a beautiful place to be treasured and protected by everyone. Through our collective efforts to address climate change and protect the environment, I am confident that the generations to come will still be able to see the beautiful Arctic we have had the chance of seeing today.

17 Thank you.