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Note No. 020/17

The Permanent Mission of the Republic of Singapore to the United Nations Office and other International Organisations at Geneva presents its compliments to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and has the honour to refer to the latter's Note Verbale of 11 January 2017, seeking information from Governments on the issue of conscientious objection to military service pursuant to resolution 20/2 adopted by the Human Rights Council (HRC) on 5 July 2012.

Singapore does not recognise the universal applicability of the right to conscientious objection to military service. HRC resolution 20/2 goes beyond what is prescribed in international law and applicable human rights instruments. The resolution refers to the conscientious objection to military service as a legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. However, Article 29 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognises that the exercise of the rights and freedoms of an individual is subject to limitations to meet the requirements of public order and the general welfare of the society. Furthermore, as recognised in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and reaffirmed in HRC resolution 24/17, the freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

National defence is a fundamental sovereign right under international law. Where individual beliefs or actions run counter to such a right, the right of a State to preserve and maintain national security must prevail.

Whereas some States may choose to establish a standing army, for a small city-state with few manpower resources like Singapore, compulsory

military service is the only way to build up a credible national defence force. National Service is the bedrock of our defence and internal security. It underpins the peace and prosperity we enjoy, and safeguards our independence and sovereignty.

This system is only viable under the principle of universality by which every male Singapore Citizen and Permanent Resident, regardless of race or religion, is required by law to fulfil compulsory military service to defend our country. Singapore respects the constitutional right to the freedom of religion. However, allowing individuals to avoid military service or choose alternative forms is unfair to those who serve and will compromise the defence of Singapore. It is not easy for a diverse society to build shared purpose and commitment to defend the peace and security of the country. There is strong public respect and support for National Service in Singapore because it is transparent, accountable and applied to all without exception.

The Permanent Mission of the Republic of Singapore to the United Nations Office and other International Organisations at Geneva avails itself of this opportunity to renew to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights the assurances of its highest consideration.

Geneva
23 February 2017

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
Geneva

