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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

SINGAPORE

OFFICIAL REPORT

FOURTEENTH PARLIAMENT

FIRST SESSION

Monday, 27 February 2023

The House met at 10:30 am

VOLUME 95

NO 87

ATTENDANCE

PRESENT:

Mr SPEAKER (Mr Tan Chuan-Jin (Marine Parade)).

Mr Abdul Samad (Nominated Member).

Ms Janet Ang (Nominated Member).

Mr Ang Wei Neng (West Coast).

Mr Baey Yam Keng (Tampines), Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Sustainability and the Environment and Minister for Transport.

Mr Chan Chun Sing (Tanjong Pagar), Minister for Education.

Miss Cheryl Chan Wei Ling (East Coast).

Mr Mark Chay (Nominated Member).

Mr Chee Hong Tat (Bishan-Toa Payoh), Senior Minister of State for Finance and Transport.

Mr Cheng Hsing Yao (Nominated Member).

Miss Cheng Li Hui (Tampines).

Mr Edward Chia Bing Hui (Holland-Bukit Timah).

Mr Chong Kee Hiong (Bishan-Toa Payoh).

Mr Desmond Choo (Tampines).

Mr Eric Chua (Tanjong Pagar), Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Culture, Community and Youth and Minister for Social and Family Development.

Mr Chua Kheng Wee Louis (Sengkang).

Mr Darryl David (Ang Mo Kio).

Mr Christopher de Souza (Holland-Bukit Timah), Deputy Speaker.

Ms Foo Mee Har (West Coast).

Ms Grace Fu Hai Yien (Yuhua), Minister for Sustainability and the Environment.

Mr Gan Kim Yong (Chua Chu Kang), Minister for Trade and Industry.

Ms Gan Siow Huang (Marymount), Minister of State for Education and Manpower.

Mr Gan Thiam Poh (Ang Mo Kio).

Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song (Aljunied).

Mr Derrick Goh (Nee Soon).

Ms He Ting Ru (Sengkang).

Mr Heng Chee How (Jalan Besar), Senior Minister of State for Defence.

Mr Heng Swee Keat (East Coast), Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for Economic Policies.

Prof Hoon Hian Teck (Nominated Member).

Mr Shawn Huang Wei Zhong (Jurong).

Ms Indranee Rajah (Tanjong Pagar), Minister, Prime Minister's Office and Second Minister for Finance and National Development and Leader of the House.

Mr S Iswaran (West Coast), Minister for Transport and Minister-in-charge of Trade Relations.

Dr Janil Puthucheary (Pasir Ris-Punggol), Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information and Health and Government Whip.

Dr Amy Khor Lean Suan (Hong Kah North), Senior Minister of State for Sustainability and the Environment and Transport.

Prof Koh Lian Pin (Nominated Member).

Dr Koh Poh Koon (Tampines), Senior Minister of State for Manpower and Sustainability and the Environment.

Mr Kwek Hian Chuan Henry (Kebun Baru).

Mr Desmond Lee (West Coast), Minister for National Development, Minister-in-charge of Social Services Integration.

Mr Lee Hsien Loong (Ang Mo Kio), Prime Minister.

Mr Leong Mun Wai (Non-Constituency Member).

Mr Liang Eng Hwa (Bukit Panjang).

Mr Lim Biow Chuan (Mountbatten).

Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim (Sengkang).

Ms Sylvia Lim (Aljunied).

Dr Lim Wee Kiak (Sembawang).

Ms Low Yen Ling (Chua Chu Kang), Minister of State for Culture, Community and Youth and Trade and Industry.

Ms Mariam Jaafar (Sembawang).

Mr Masagos Zulkifli B M M (Tampines), Minister for Social and Family Development, Second Minister for Health and Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs.

Dr Mohamad Maliki Bin Osman (East Coast), Minister, Prime Minister's Office and Second Minister for Education and Foreign Affairs.

Mr Mohd Fahmi Aliman (Marine Parade).

Mr Muhamad Faisal Bin Abdul Manap (Aljunied).

Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim (Nee Soon), Minister of State for Home Affairs and National Development.

Mr Murali Pillai (Bukit Batok).

Ms Nadia Ahmad Samdin (Ang Mo Kio).

Dr Ng Eng Hen (Bishan-Toa Payoh), Minister for Defence.

Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang (Nee Soon).

Ms Ng Ling Ling (Ang Mo Kio).

Miss Rachel Ong (West Coast).

Mr Ong Ye Kung (Sembawang), Minister for Health.

Ms Joan Pereira (Tanjong Pagar).

Mr Leon Perera (Aljunied).

Ms Denise Phua Lay Peng (Jalan Besar).

Ms Poh Li San (Sembawang).

Mr Pritam Singh (Aljunied), Leader of the Opposition.

Ms Rahayu Mahzam (Jurong), Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health and Minister for Law.

Mr Saktiandi Supaat (Bishan-Toa Payoh).

Mr Seah Kian Peng (Marine Parade).

Dr Shahira Abdullah (Nominated Member).

Mr Sharael Taha (Pasir Ris-Punggol).

Ms Sim Ann (Holland-Bukit Timah), Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and National Development and Deputy Government Whip.

Mr Sitoh Yih Pin (Potong Pasir).

Ms Hany Soh (Marsiling-Yew Tee).

Ms Sun Xueling (Punggol West), Minister of State for Home Affairs and Social and Family Development.

Mr Alvin Tan (Tanjong Pagar), Minister of State for Culture, Community and Youth and Trade and Industry.

Ms Carrie Tan (Nee Soon).

Mr Desmond Tan (Pasir Ris-Punggol), Minister of State, Prime Minister's Office.

Mr Tan Kiat How (East Coast), Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information and National Development.

Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong (Hougang).

Dr Tan See Leng (Marine Parade), Minister for Manpower and Second Minister for Trade and Industry.

Ms Jessica Tan Soon Neo (East Coast), Deputy Speaker.

Dr Tan Wu Meng (Jurong).

Dr Tan Yia Swam (Nominated Member).

Mr Patrick Tay Teck Guan (Pioneer).

Mr Teo Chee Hean (Pasir Ris-Punggol), Senior Minister and Coordinating Minister for National Security.

Mrs Josephine Teo (Jalan Besar), Minister for Communications and Information and Second Minister for Home Affairs.

Mr Raj Joshua Thomas (Nominated Member).

Ms Tin Pei Ling (MacPherson).

Mr Edwin Tong Chun Fai (Marine Parade), Minister for Culture, Community and Youth and Second Minister for Law.

Mr Vikram Nair (Sembawang).

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan (Holland-Bukit Timah), Minister for Foreign Affairs.

Dr Wan Rizal (Jalan Besar).

Mr Don Wee (Chua Chu Kang).
Mr Lawrence Wong (Marsiling-Yew Tee), Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance.
Mr Xie Yao Quan (Jurong).
Ms Yeo Wan Ling (Pasir Ris-Punggol).
Mr Yip Hon Weng (Yio Chu Kang).
Mr Melvin Yong Yik Chye (Radin Mas).
Mr Zaqy Mohamad (Marsiling-Yew Tee), Senior Minister of State for Defence and Manpower and Deputy Leader of the House.
Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim (Chua Chu Kang).

ABSENT:

Ms Hazel Poa (Non-Constituency Member).
Mr K Shanmugam (Nee Soon), Minister for Home Affairs and Law.
Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam (Jurong), Senior Minister and Coordinating Minister for Social Policies.
Mr Alex Yam (Marsiling-Yew Tee).

PERMISSION TO MEMBERS TO BE ABSENT

Under the provisions of clause 2(d) of Article 46 of the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, the following Members have been granted permission by the Speaker to be absent from sittings of Parliament (or any Committee of Parliament to which they have been appointed) for the periods stated:

Name	From	To
	(2023)	(2023)
Mr K Shanmugam	22 Feb	01 Mar
Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam	26 Feb	05 Mar
Ms Hazel Poa	27 Feb	27 Feb

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

DATA ON FUNDS UTILISED FOR SINGAPORE GLOBAL NETWORK FUNDING PROGRAMME

1 **Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song** asked the Minister for Trade and Industry (a) in each of the past three years, how much funding has been utilised for the Singapore Global Network Funding Programme; (b) which are the main countries and cities where this funding has been utilised; (c) how many applications for funding are received and what proportion of applications are approved; and (d) what measurable outcomes are attributable to this programme.

The Minister of State for Trade and Industry (Ms Low Yen Ling) (for the Minister for Trade and Industry): Mr Speaker, between August 2020 and December 2022, the Singapore Global Network Funding Programme (SGNFP) disbursed around \$570,000 and supported close to 300 ground-up efforts around the world. About two-thirds of SGNFP applications were successful. These included funding for events such as networking sessions, forums, webinars, festive celebrations and partnerships on digital content creation.

These efforts support the Singapore Global Network (SGN) in broadening and deepening our overseas ties and network with family, friends and fans of Singapore. The programme has reached out to around 25,000 participants in more than 20 countries like Australia, China, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US), where many overseas Singaporeans are based.

Mr Speaker: Mr Gerald Giam.

Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song (Aljunied): I thank the Minister of State for her reply. Is the main objective of SGNFP to encourage Singaporean talent abroad to return to Singapore and contribute to our economy and our society. And if not, what is the SGN programme's main objective?

Secondly, what kind of events and activities were funded by SGN? The Minister of State mentioned that there was \$570,000 that was spent. And how effective were they in achieving these objectives? I am not sure if I heard correctly that two-thirds were successful. What happens to the other one-third, then?

Ms Low Yen Ling: Mr Speaker, I want to thank the Member Mr Gerald Giam for his questions. I think he will agree with me that overseas Singaporeans are an integral part of the Singapore family. If you remember, SGN was launched in August 2020 and that replaced the Overseas Singaporeans Unit (OSU). *[Please refer to "Clarification by Minister of State for Trade and Industry ", Official Report, 27 February 2023, Vol 95, Issue 87, Clarification section.]*

The SGN has various programmes and one of the programmes is the one that the Parliamentary Question is about, the SGNFP which supports the SGN to broaden and deepen our overseas network of family and friends. Especially at the height of COVID-19, it was so important to make sure that they remained connected to Singapore, even as they were overseas expanding their networks.

Allow me to also share that today, within a short span of two-and-a-half years, and despite COVID-19 and the difficulty of organising events, the SGN now has more than 100,000 members around the world, including 15,000 C-suite executives. And there are close to 300 partners that collaborate with the SGN on various partnership initiatives, to do a few things and the aim of SGN is to do a few things: one, to promote networking and collaboration amongst Singaporeans and friends of Singapore; two, connect the community of family and friends of Singapore; and three, to provide platforms to share about opportunities and developments in Singapore and Southeast Asia.

The SGN team is also open to working with overseas Singaporeans who are exploring to come back to Singapore to work or to have them to come back because of their kids' education.

In terms of the numbers, I mentioned that, due to COVID-19, even though we could not have events, it is quite heartening to see that we had received 448 applications for the SGN and the SGNFP. Out of that, two-thirds of the applications were approved and out of those approved, 70% are Singaporeans, of which more than 60% are students.

So, it is an important platform to allow our students, our working professionals and business owners overseas to stay connected to Singapore through these various activities – whether it is webinar or over Zoom or physical sessions. I can tell you, National Day and Lunar New Year celebrations in the various cities are very well-received, especially when we bring Singaporean food.

I hope that answers the question.

Mr Speaker: Mr Gerald Giam.

Mr Gerald Giam Yeap Song: I thank the Minister of State for her answer. Does SGN work closely with our Missions abroad to engage Singaporeans on domestic and foreign policy issues that matter to them overseas as well as their families back home? This is related to also my cut on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) later, on engaging Singaporeans on foreign policy.

Ms Low Yen Ling: I want to thank the Member for his supplementary question. Since the launch in August 2020, the SGN has replaced the OSU and is now sitting with the Economic Development Board. As part of that, the SGN team will work closely with not just the economic agencies, but also with MFA and our Missions, to allow Singaporeans, even though they cannot come back – for example, in the last three years, whether they are in Beijing or in other cities in Australia and the US – that they have a way to stay connected to Singapore and at the same time, to also understand the various refinements to the policies and current affairs as well.

PLAIN LANGUAGE LEGISLATION FOR CLARITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

2 Mr Leon Perera asked the Minister for Communications and Information whether the Government will consider introducing plain language legislation to ensure clarity and accessibility of Government communications, as has been passed in the United States and New Zealand.

The Senior Minister of State for Communications and Information (Dr Janil Puthucherry) (for the Minister for Communications and Information): Mr Speaker, Sir, we do want to achieve better Government communications through plain and clear language. However, there are no plans to pursue this aim through legislation. Our public communications policy calls for plain language, so that messages are clear and accessible for members of the public. The Government Instruction Manual requires all public servants to write well and speak clearly. Communication is an essential function of Public Service and we need to do so in all four of our official languages.

Mr Speaker, the Government acknowledges that not all of its communications are written in a simple, concise and clear manner. However, introducing legislation is not the answer. Instead, we will pursue this aim through education, training, role-modelling and holding ourselves to high standards. The experience in other countries where legislation has been introduced suggests that our approach has merit.

This is ongoing work, with no short cuts. We will continue to remind ourselves and colleagues within Public Service to communicate in language that is simple, clear, precise, accurate and, ideally, concise.

Mr Speaker: Mr Leon Perera.

Mr Leon Perera (Aljunied): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I appreciate the Senior Minister of State's reply. I just have one supplementary question, which is that, would the Government consider launching a whole-of-Government (WOG) movement to simplify language in Government communications, in a very concerted manner that is regularly reviewed.

Mr Speaker, Sir, with your permission, could I just read out one sentence from a letter I received from a Government agency?

Mr Speaker: If you keep it concise.

Mr Leon Perera: Yes. I received this letter from a particular agency, and I am just going to read out this one sentence: "We have reviewed your case and we regret to inform you that we are unable to accede to your request as the evidence supports the offence disclosed."

I do not mean to be too prescriptive but, for example, you could reword this and say, "We have reviewed the facts and we are sorry that we cannot agree to your request because there is not enough proof." This is an example. For many Singaporeans who receive Government communications, English may not always be their first language. So, I think my clarification is, would the Government consider implementing much more simplified communications in its letters and so on to Singaporeans, as a WOG effort.

Dr Janil Puthucheary: Mr Speaker, I agree with Mr Leon Perera that we do need to simplify our communications and aim for clarity, wherever possible. We also do have to make sure that there is precision and accuracy in the statements. These are tensions that Government officers will require training and support, but I can assure Mr Perera we have the same intent.

Mr Speaker: And the same in Parliament as well.

DISTINCTION BETWEEN SOCIAL AND ILLEGAL CARPOOLING

3 **Mr Yip Hon Weng** asked the Minister for Transport (a) what are the distinctions between social carpooling and illegal carpooling as defined by the Ministry; and (b) what action will the Ministry take to stop the use of chat groups that facilitate illegal carpooling.

The Senior Minister of State for Transport (Dr Amy Khor Lean Suan) (for the Minister for Transport): A shared journey involving friends or colleagues, where typically no payment is required, is considered a social carpooling trip.

However, if the carpooling is among strangers, that is, the passenger does not know the driver, then, in the interest of both drivers and passengers, this must be done via licensed carpooling operators, for example, by booking GrabHitch or RydePool services; or through other smaller operators. In such cases, operators are required to verify drivers' licences and enforce a maximum of two carpool journeys a day at cost recovery. Details of booked trips are also recorded by operators, which can be used to aid investigations in the event of an incident or a dispute. Illegal carpooling trips matched through other platforms, such as Telegram chatgroups, do not have such safeguards. We would urge members of the public to book their journeys only with carpooling operators.

The Land Transport Authority (LTA) has been taking enforcement action against drivers providing illegal carpooling services under section 101(1) of the Road Traffic Act, and will continue to monitor and conduct enforcement checks. Commuters who encounter such drivers can also file a report with LTA.

Mr Speaker: Mr Yip.

Mr Yip Hon Weng (Yio Chu Kang): I thank the Senior Minister of State for her reply. I have two supplementary questions. Will social carpooling individuals be put in a difficult situation if LTA tightens regulations towards illegal carpooling and how effective is LTA's enforcement in differentiating between the two practices?

Second, as many carpooling groups can operate through chatgroups, such as Telegram, how does the Ministry of Transport (MOT) intend to leverage technology and work with the Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI) to monitor such groups?

Dr Amy Khor Lean Suan: I thank the Member for his supplementary questions. Firstly, as I have mentioned earlier, to ensure commuter safety, we have limited the matching of carpooling services with strangers to only be done via licensed carpooling operators or the smaller operators – that means business entities that are carpooling operators, because these operators maintain records of the drivers as well as the trips booked, in case of a dispute or an incident. In the past, we have had reports of disputes as well as assault cases arising from unregulated carpooling services.

But social carpooling arrangements – generally made between friends or colleagues, typically with no payment made – are permitted. LTA will only take enforcement actions against drivers who are found to have completed these carpooling trips with strangers for a fee that are matched through other channels besides the carpooling operators. And usually, this is taken either through public feedback or if LTA conducts enforcement operations that are targeted at these illegal carpooling activities. When we conduct operations, we need to get evidence that these completed trips are actually between strangers and are for a fee through a channel that is not through the carpooling operators, before we take action.

LTA will exercise reasonableness and will not intervene if they are purely social carpooling arrangements.

Basically, if the driver provides trips through these chatgroups, has a valid vocational licence and drives a public service vehicle, then, that is not illegal and it is allowed. It is only not allowed if the driver does not have a valid vocational licence and does not drive a private hire car; then, that would be illegal.

CRIMINAL OFFENCES ARISING FROM ILLEGAL CARPOOLING

4 **Mr Yip Hon Weng** asked the Minister for Home Affairs (a) in the last three years, how many criminal offences are reported to the Police arising from illegal carpooling, beyond the offence of offering an illegal hitch ride; (b) for these offences, what are the five common crimes; and (c) whether these crimes are under-reported given the illegal nature of unregulated carpooling.

The Minister of State for Home Affairs (Ms Sun Xueling) (for the Minister for Home Affairs): Mr Speaker, Sir, the Police do not track whether a criminal offence is associated with, and/or committed within the context of illegal carpooling. As such, we are unable to comment if such crimes are under-reported.

DATA ON SELECTION OF HDB BLOCKS FOR HOME IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME

5 **Mr Ang Wei Neng** asked the Minister for National Development as of January 2023 (a) how many HDB blocks that are above 30 years old have not been selected for the Home Improvement Programme (HIP); (b) how many HDB blocks that are below 30 years old have been selected for HIP; and (c) how is HDB prioritising older HDB blocks for HIP.

The Senior Minister of State for National Development (Ms Sim Ann) (for the Minister for National Development): Mr Speaker, as at end January 2023, there are 527 blocks 30 years and above eligible for the Home Improvement Programme (HIP), but which are pending selection.

Out of the 4,449 blocks selected for HIP since the programme's inception in 2007, 102 blocks are below 30 years, as at 2023. Generally, these blocks have been selected for HIP as they form a contiguous parcel with blocks that are 30 years and above.

At the beginning of each Nomination Exercise to select blocks for the HIP, the Housing and Development Board (HDB) will inform Town Councils of the remaining precincts or blocks that are eligible and invite them to nominate a number of the eligible precincts and blocks, especially those that are aged 30 years and above, for HDB and the Ministry of National Development (MND)'s evaluation. In general, MND and HDB will accord priority to older flats, while ensuring that there is a good geographical spread of HIP projects across public housing estates.

Mr Speaker: Mr Ang Wei Neng.

Mr Ang Wei Neng (West Coast): I thank the Senior Minister of State for her reply. Can I ask whether the HIP progress has been slowed by COVID-19, and if so, are there any plans to ramp up so that more HIPs can be rolled out to more precincts and more residents can benefit from it?

Ms Sim Ann: Mr Speaker, in reply to Mr Ang, as with many other public sector construction projects, HIP did get affected by COVID-19-related delays. However, now with the projects that are being selected, we will do our best to expedite them. We also know that residents have been looking forward to them.

Mr Speaker: Mr Gerald Giam.

Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song (Aljunied): I thank the Senior Minister of State for her reply. I just want to find out what is the age of the oldest block that has yet to be selected for HIP and where is that block located, as far as constituency is concerned? And just now, the Senior Minister of State mentioned that one of the factors, besides age, is the geographical spread of the blocks. How does this factor into HDB's decision on choosing blocks based on geographical spread?

Ms Sim Ann: Mr Speaker, I do not have the specific answer to Mr Giam's first supplementary question.

As for how we look at geographical spread, this actually reflects, to a very large extent, the history of our HDB building programmes because in the past, we have been developing new towns and this results, for instance, in flats of a certain age being bunched in certain localities.

But we also know that, generally, once the flats get to a certain age, there will be reasons why residents would like to see a refresh, so we bear this in mind. There will be times when there are towns with more flats that are of a certain age, but we try to also provide a spread, so that more residents will be able to see a refresh going on in their estates.

SITING SPORTS STADIUM WITHIN HOUSING ESTATES

The following question stood in the name of **Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim** –

6 To ask the Minister for Culture, Community and Youth (a) what are the considerations behind the siting of a sports stadium in a given housing estate; and (b) whether stadia equipped with running tracks are regarded as a standard amenity for every town.

Mr Leon Perera (Aljunied): Question No 6.

The Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Culture, Community and Youth (Mr Eric Chua) (for the Minister for Culture, Community and Youth): Mr Speaker, the Sports Facilities Master Plan (SFMP) aims to give Singaporeans good access to high quality sport facilities for them to pursue an active lifestyle, stay healthy and build strong community bonds through sports.

The Master Plan comprises a range of sporting and recreational facilities that meet national, regional and local town needs. We provide for every Housing and Development Board (HDB) Town to have either a Town Sports Centre or Regional Sports Centre, and depending on population trends, may also be supplemented with a Town Play Field. Each of these facilities offer a broad range of sporting amenities to cater to a variety of different sporting and recreational interests.

In determining what specific facilities to put in the towns, SportSG takes into account a variety of considerations, such as the town population size, popularity of sports, utilisation rates, availability of space, proximity to other sport and recreational amenities, as well as feedback from residents.

BALANCE IN MEDISAVE AMOUNTS FOLLOWING DEATH OF CPF ACCOUNT HOLDERS

7 Mr Patrick Tay Teck Guan asked the Minister for Health in each of the past five years, what is the number of CPF account holders who at the point of death have monies left in their CPF MediSave accounts to the sum of (i) less than \$1,000 (ii) between \$1,000 and \$10,000 (iii) between \$10,000 and \$20,000 (iv) between \$20,000 and \$30,000 (v) between \$30,000 and \$40,000 (vi) between \$40,000 and \$50,000 and (vii) between \$50,000 and the MediSave account limit.

The Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health (Ms Rahayu Mahzam) (for the Minister for Health): Mr Speaker, MediSave helps Singaporeans set aside part of their income over their working years, to save up for healthcare expenses in their old age. It is, therefore, more instructive to look at MediSave balances at the point of death for Singaporeans who lived till an advanced age.

For Singaporeans who passed away aged 85 or older, between 2017 and 2021, about two in 10 had \$1,000 or less; five in 10 had between \$1,000 and \$10,000; about one in 10 had between \$10,000 and \$20,000, \$20,000 and \$30,000, and more than \$30,000 left in their MediSave accounts, at the point of death respectively.

Mr Speaker: Mr Patrick Tay.

Mr Patrick Tay Teck Guan (Pioneer): I thank the Senior Parliamentary Secretary for the reply. I note that the data given is only for those above 85 years old, because there is quite a number who are below 85 at the point of death, the figures are not given.

I think the crux of the issue is that we do hear, anecdotally, many MediSave account holders who pass on with larger or quite significant amounts in their MediSave accounts. And therefore, this is an appeal for the Ministry of Health (MOH) to consider whether we can allow greater MediSave deductions, especially for those with chronic illnesses, rare diseases, as well as for exigencies, where they need to tap on the MediSave to pay, to prolong their life and make sure that they are adequately treated.

Ms Rahayu Mahzam: I thank the Member for raising this issue. I note the concern, but there was a Parliamentary Question that had been raised previously. And insofar as to those who are 65 years old and above, the amount left in their MediSave is also not that high. So, although we do see some with large amounts left, in general, we believe a larger number do not have excessively high amounts, of more than \$10,000. That is one point.

The second thing is that we allow MediSave to be withdrawn in a lump sum for those who are terminally ill, up to a minimum balance of \$5,000, under the Central Provident Fund (CPF) Board's Reduced Life Expectancy Terminally Ill scheme. So, this is something that they could avail themselves to, if there are situations where there are members who have terminal illnesses.

And also, over the years, MOH has expanded MediSave, to allow for more flexibility for the elderly to use for their healthcare needs. For example, we have lowered the age for Flexi-MediSave from 65 to 60 in 2018, and we also increase the withdrawal limit from \$200 to \$300 per year in 2021, so that more can use Flexi-MediSave for outpatient treatments.

This is all the top of the MediSave 500/700 that was also enhanced for chronic treatments, specifically.

But I note the concerns and we will continue to review the use of MediSave to strike the balance between affordability and ensuring that Singaporeans have sufficient savings for healthcare needs in old age.

CORRELATION BETWEEN TIGHTENING OF FOREIGN WORKER QUOTAS AND HIRING OF SINGAPOREANS AT HIGHER PAY

8 Mr Leon Perera asked the Minister for Manpower (a) whether the Government has conducted any studies to determine to what extent, when foreign worker quotas and access to Employment Pass or S Pass holders is tightened, will lead to firms hiring more Singaporeans, firms hiring Singaporeans at higher pay, firms hiring more Singaporeans at higher pay and business failures that lead to net job destruction over the following one year period; and (b) if not, whether the Government will consider studying this and make public the findings.

The Minister for Manpower (Dr Tan See Leng): To ensure good employment outcomes for Singaporeans, it is important that our policies enable firms to access foreign workers who can complement the local workforce, so that firms can grow and can create more opportunities for locals.

To support policymaking, the Government regularly conducts impact assessment studies on a range of policies, and of course, this includes foreign workforce policies. The Government publishes some of these studies every quarter through the Economic Survey of Singapore.

One key finding of our internal studies on foreign workforce policies is that tightening access to lower-skilled foreign workers is more likely to have a positive impact on local employment outcomes, compared to tightening access to higher-skilled foreign workers. This is because businesses will then be able to substitute lower-skilled but cheaper foreign workers with locals, and therefore, improve their production processes accordingly. This has informed our approach of remaining open to high-quality, foreign professionals, while maintaining a disciplined stance in regulating the number of Work Permit holders through quotas and also levies.

It is important to note that these studies are but just one input to the policymaking process. These studies have their limitations, for example, they are unable to account for less quantifiable effects of having foreigners in our workforce, such as the knowledge spillovers to locals and other network effects.

The impact of the interventions studied might also change if they are applied beyond a certain scale or at a different time period. As such, they need to be interpreted carefully alongside other sources of information, including more recent labour market statistics, as well as industry feedback.

Mr Speaker: Mr Leon Perera.

Mr Leon Perera (Aljunied): I thank the Minister for that helpful reply. Just two supplementary questions. Firstly, just to make sure that I have the right understanding. The Minister was saying that, based on the impact studies that have been conducted in the past, for lower-skilled workers, when the supply of foreign manpower, when that tap is tightened, that tends to lead to better employment outcomes for Singaporeans at the lower end of the wage scale – I just wanted to clarify that. Because that is an interesting finding.

For the other observation that the Minister made about the studies that for more highly-skilled foreign professionals, that that correlation does not really apply so much as it does to the lower-skilled workers. Would the right conclusion to draw from that, be that, we, in Singapore, are not producing enough highly-skilled or qualified professionals to fill the job vacancies that the economy is creating?

Dr Tan See Leng: I thank the Member for his supplementary questions. The first point, in terms of the studies' findings for low-skilled workers, is that up to a certain point, the studies have shown that, if you tighten at the lower-skilled segment, the net result is that we do get substitution and our locals can take on these jobs, but at slightly higher levels. To a point.

Because of the size of our population and the size of our workforce, up to a point, if you continue to tighten, it can actually have a worse-off effect for the development of our country, in terms of our economic progress, as well as industry development.

For the higher-skilled, again, you cannot infer from the studies that for higher-skilled workers, we are not doing enough to produce high calibre, local Singapore talent. We are already doing significantly more to improve their prospects, in terms of moving them, in terms of investing in their training, and in upskilling and upgrading. But again, because of the fact that there are all these accelerating changes, economies and industries are evolving very rapidly, and coupled with that, significant disruptions are happening.

So, to keep pace and to keep ahead pre-emptively, in terms of making sure that we are ahead of the competition, we not only need to develop our own local talent, we will also need foreign workers to come alongside with us and complement us as we move forward. I hope that answers the Member's question.

10.58 pm

Mr Speaker: Order, end of question time. The Clerk will now proceed to read the Orders of the Day.

[Pursuant to Standing Order No 22(3), provided that Members had not asked for questions standing in their names to be postponed to a later Sitting day or withdrawn, written answers to questions not reached by the end of Question Time are reproduced in the Appendix.]

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES OF EXPENDITURE FOR THE FINANCIAL YEAR 1 APRIL 2022 TO 31 MARCH 2023

(Committee of Supply – Paper Cmd 21 of 2023)

Order read for consideration in Committee of Supply [Allotted Day].

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

10.59 am

The Chairman: Supplementary Estimates of Expenditure for the financial year 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023, contained in Paper Cmd 21 of 2023. As there are no amendments, I propose to take the Heads of Expenditure en bloc. I will first take Heads B, E, G, J, P, Q, T, V, W, X and Z of the Supplementary Main Estimates.

Question, "That the sums stated for the Heads of Expenditure as shown on page 6 of Paper Cmd 21 of 2023 stand part of the Supplementary Main Estimates," put and agreed to.

The Chairman: I will now take the Supplementary Development Estimates. In respect of the Supplementary Development Estimates, they are Heads J, Q, S, V, W and X.

Question, "That the sums stated for the Heads of Expenditure as shown on page 9 of Paper Cmd 21 of 2023 stand part of the Supplementary Development Estimates," put and agreed to.

Question, "That the sum of \$9,175,357,100 shall be supplied to the Government under the Heads of Expenditure for the public services shown in the Supplementary Main Estimates of Expenditure for the financial year 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023, contained in Paper Cmd 21 of 2023," put and agreed to.

Question, "That the sum of \$5,211,667,500 shall be supplied to the Government under the Head of Expenditure for the public services shown in the Supplementary Development Estimates of Expenditure for the financial year 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023, contained in Paper Cmd 21 of 2023."

Resolutions to be reported.

Mr Speaker: Second Minister for Finance.

The Second Minister for Finance (Ms Indranee Rajah): Mr Speaker, I beg to report that the Committee of Supply has come to certain resolutions.

First Resolution reported,

"That the sum of \$9,175,357,100 shall be supplied to the Government under the Heads of Expenditure for the public services shown in the Supplementary Main Estimates of Expenditure for the financial year 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023, contained in Paper Cmd 21 of 2023."

Second Resolution reported,

"That the sum of \$5,211,667,500 shall be supplied to the Government under the Head of Expenditure for the public services shown in the Supplementary Development Estimates of Expenditure for the financial year 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023, contained in Paper Cmd 21 of 2023."

Ms Indranee Rajah: Mr Speaker, I beg to move, "That Parliament doth agree with the Committee on the said resolutions."

Question put, and agreed to.

Resolutions accordingly agreed to.

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to read item two, I think Ms Low Yen Ling has a clarification for the Parliamentary Questions earlier.

CLARIFICATION BY MINISTER OF STATE FOR TRADE AND INDUSTRY

11.04 am

The Minister of State for Trade and Industry (Ms Low Yen Ling): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I would like to make a clarification on my answer for Parliamentary Question No 1. [*Please refer to "Data on Funds Utilised for Singapore Global Network Funding Programme", Official Report, 27 February 2023, Vol 95, Issue 87, Oral Answers to Questions section.*]

I would like to clarify that the Singapore Global Network (SGN) was set up in June 2019, while the SGN Funding Programme was launched in August 2020.

Mr Speaker: We will now proceed with item two.

ESTIMATES OF EXPENDITURE FOR THE FINANCIAL YEAR 1 APRIL 2023 TO 31 MARCH 2024

(Committee of Supply – Paper Cmd 20 of 2023)

Order read for consideration in Committee of Supply [2nd Allotted Day].

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY – HEAD J (MINISTRY OF DEFENCE)

(A safe and secure nation in turbulent times)

Head J (cont) –

Resumption of Debate on Question [24 February 2023],

"That the total sum to be allocated for Head J of the Estimates be reduced by \$100". – [Mr Vikram Nair].

Question again proposed.

The Chairman: Mr Desmond Choo.

Mr Desmond Choo (Tampines): Mr Chairman, can I take the two cuts together?

The Chairman: Yes, please.

11.04 am

Updates on SAF Training

Mr Desmond Choo (Tampines): In order to prepare our National Servicemen (NSmen) to effectively defend Singapore against evolving threats, our training facilities need to be consistently refreshed to make sure that they provide realistic and relevant battlefield environments.

Today, the battlefield may not necessarily be in a field or a jungle, but also in an urban environment. Back in 2019, the Ministry of Defence (MINDEF) started construction on Singapore Armed Forces Training Institute (SAFTI) City, a state-of-the-art urban training facility that aims to leverage on technology to enhance training for our Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) soldiers.

However, due to disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, MINDEF announced that the development of the SAFTI City project had been delayed, similar to other construction projects throughout Singapore.

With Singapore having entered into an endemic COVID-19 phase and gone to Disease Outbreak Response System Condition (DORSCON) Green, can MINDEF provide updates on the SAFTI City and the development of other military training facilities in Singapore?

SAF Overseas Training

Many Singaporean soldiers have had the privilege of participating in SAF training overseas. For these soldiers, this was one of the highlights of their training and service to the nation.

Overseas training is critical in bolstering our national defence. It allows us to overcome our natural space constraints and conduct important training that would have otherwise been impossible here. For our national servicemen, it is also an opportunity for them to appreciate the scale of the SAF's capabilities and operations. Such overseas training is critical to SAF building up capabilities beyond what the limited space of Singapore can provide.

One of the biggest overseas training areas we have is the Shoalwater Bay Training Area in Australia, which is currently undergoing an expansion. During the Minister for Defence's visit to the troops participating in Exercise Trident and Exercise Wallaby in Australia in September 2022, he stated that the expanded training area would eventually provide an area ten times the size of Singapore for our soldiers to train.

I would like to ask the Minister for a progress update on the SAF's training area development in Australia and how can these new facilities enhance our training for our national servicemen? When will our soldiers be able to utilise this training asset fully?

Air Force Training

Mr Xie Yao Quan (Jurong): Chairman, Sir, multiple residents have given me feedback about the Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) flying activities in Western Singapore, for example, "They fly so low we can even read the numbers and logos on the planes." "Makes it impossible to work from home or have conference calls." "They blast their engines at 6.20 am and 9 pm." "My young kids get startled by the noise and cry." "We have stayed in the area for over 20 years and have never experienced this intense frequency of noise."

One, we all understand that the RSAF must stay operationally ready, so it must train. Two, airspace in Singapore is tight and the RSAF must fly over residential areas en route to international air space. And three, some of the flying is, in fact, not training in nature, but operational responses to situations.

But can the RSAF review its flying parameters on timing, flying altitude, frequency, and most importantly, its flight path, say if there is a possibility to fly more over the lesser populated Lim Chu Kang area, to ensure a more sustainable balance, in the longer term, between operational readiness and a tolerable level of noise for residents in the West?

Harnessing Technology for Training

Mr Kwek Hian Chuan Henry (Kebun Baru): Chairman, Sir, vigorous training is key to an effective military. Consider combined arms warfare, a modern warfighting concept used by the best militaries, including Singapore. It involves the combination of infantry, artillery, armour, air support and naval forces. It requires high coordination and communication between the branches. Units must be able to work in concert with others, adapting to changing battlefields.

To acquire such sophisticated warfighting skills, our soldiers must train effectively to acquire individual or sub-unit skills. They must also participate in larger-scale trainings and exercises to build teamwork between units.

At the same time, the application of technology can improve the realism and effectiveness of training. These technologies include individualised or combined simulators for our air, land and sea assets. This also includes war-gaming software and specialised training facilities embedded with sensors and playback capabilities.

Can the Minister for Defence share how SAF is utilising the latest technology, combine with the right facilities and safety protocol, to prepare our soldiers for any contingencies?

Multilateral Defence Cooperation

Mr Shawn Huang Wei Zhong (Jurong): The challenges we face in the information and cyber domains have grown far beyond any single country's ability to address. Not only have they grown in relevance, countries are also becoming more reliant on social media and digital technologies. Almost every aspect of our lives has an online presence, including for the purposes of accessing essential services, transactions and communication.

Losing access to the cyber and information domains would be extremely disruptive and is a challenge that transcends national boundaries. While the world has become more seamless, integrated and interconnected through digital means, it has led to a new wave of modern security challenges, increasing our exposure to cyberattacks, disinformation and misinformation. We have witnessed a significant increase in the volume, frequency and reach of disinformation and falsehoods, not just within, but also across societies. In order to combat these common challenges, deeper international and multilateral cooperation can be essential.

In light of this, could the Minister for Defence provide views on what Singapore can do to ensure that multilateral cooperation remains strong, to address the increasingly transnational nature of the digital threats that we face?

Regional Security Dialogue

Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim (Chua Chu Kang): As we begin to step out from COVID-19, we are seeing the slow return of things to their normal pre-pandemic state. However, we have not been fortunate to witness a similar turning point in the regional security environment.

Instead, we see a hardening of tensions and an increasingly charged geopolitical environment, overlaid by deepening United States (US)-China strategic rivalry. Recently, the spy balloon saga has caused the rift between them, to further widen and divide the global community.

In last year's Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD), there was a comment by a representative of China's People's Liberation Army of his perception that the forum is dominated by the US and its allies.

Could the Minister for Defence provide an update on MINDEF's efforts to foster security dialogue in the region? How can Singapore position itself as the neutral platform for open and honest dialogue on regional security?

Training Safety

Mr Saktiandi Supaat (Bishan-Toa Payoh): I am glad that the SAF has resumed its full-scale overseas training exercises in 2022, after two years of COVID-19 disruptions. These overseas exercises are essential to provide our SAF troops with realistic and effective training, given our land constraints. But this "return-to-normal" also makes training safety a paramount concern, especially where existing National Service (NS) commanders may not have the necessary experience from the last two years of lower-tempo training.

The large majority of our soldiers are full-time National Servicemen (NSFs) or Operationally-Ready NSmen (ORNS). We can all agree that in peacetime, we owe it to their parents and families to return them home after training – safe and sound. That is also my hope when my sons grow up and serve their NS in future.

Can MINDEF provide an update on how the SAF upholds safety in training, even as it seeks to conduct realistic and effective training?

Training safety is often seen to be at the expense of training realism and operational efficiency. Whether through its Inspector General's Office or the External Review Panels on SAF Safety, how has the SAF sought to innovate so that training safety is being pursued together with the aims of operational realism and effectiveness, and not simply enhancing safety measures at all costs?

Are MINDEF and SAF regularly engaging with foreign counterparts regarding approaches to training safety, and what are some of the useful lessons we have learnt or can learn from other militaries?

Safety Culture in SAF

Miss Cheng Li Hui (Tampines): Mr Chairman, the safety of our service men and women is paramount. At last year's Committee of Supply (COS), Senior Minister of State Heng Chee How spoke about emphasising a strong safety culture in the SAF through audits and inspections.

What were the recent findings from such audits and inspections, including those conducted by the External Review Panel on Training Safety?

The Chairman: Mr Seah Kian Peng. Not here. Mr Patrick Tay.

Optimising NS Deployment

Mr Patrick Tay Teck Guan (Pioneer): NS is an important component of our nation's defence and the contributions and commitment of our NSmen are instrumental in ensuring peace, stability and security of Singapore.

However, Singapore's total fertility rate, which is already one of the lowest in the world, is declining. As a result, the number of full-time NSmen is projected to decrease. This further exacerbates the situation as our NSmen form the bulk of our defence force.

This statistic could be worrying for MINDEF and the SAF, as it poses a significant manpower and structural challenge to the SAF. We would eventually have to face the issue of maintaining an effective military force with a much leaner SAF.

11.15 am

With that in mind, how is MINDEF and SAF working to ensure that we optimise the development and deployment of our NSmen within the SAF, to tap on and maximise their skills, physical status, capabilities and contributions?

Functional Assessment for NS Pre-enlistees

Mr Gan Thiam Poh (Ang Mo Kio): Chair, many in this House would agree that our people are our most important resource. Our rapidly ageing population and low fertility rate have a direct impact on SAF. Thus, we must ensure that our NSmen are deployed efficiently to tasks which they are able to carry out effectively and safely.

With the adoption of cutting-edge military technologies, there are now new tools that our NSmen can use in a wider range of vocations. It is, therefore, timely for us to reconsider whether there are now new opportunities for our NSmen to take on.

At the COS debate last year, Senior Minister of State for Defence Mr Heng Chee How shared with the House that the SAF had successfully implemented functional assessments for NSFs, with more NSmen safely deployed as transport operators. He also shared that functional assessments would also be extended to pre-enlistees with orthopaedic conditions.

Would MINDEF, therefore, provide an update on the implementation of these functional assessments?

Work-Learn Schemes

Mr Don Wee (Chua Chu Kang): Chairman, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruptions to our economy and society. In particular, the education, training and opportunities for our young people had been impacted. Many lessons and training programmes were conducted online, and our youth were not able to harness the full benefits of in-person interactions and hands-on experience.

Technology is changing the way we live and work. Notwithstanding the global layoffs by major technology companies, digital skills – such as coding and data analytics – will continue to be crucial in the future of work.

It is important that our young NSmen are adequately prepared to meet the challenges of the new economy, even as they train to defend our nation.

In this regard, MINDEF's Work-Learn Scheme is well-placed to meet the aspirations of our people. Since it was introduced in 2018, MINDEF had expanded it to cover more roles and vocations. Last year, Senior Minister of State Mr Heng Chee How highlighted and updated that the SAF will introduce another two Work-Learn Schemes – the Digital Work-Learn Scheme for eligible servicemen to pursue undergraduate degrees in areas, such as Computer Engineering and Data Science, as well as the Work-Study Diploma for Supply Supervisors.

Can MINDEF provide an update on the expansion of the Work-Learn Scheme for NSFs to more roles and vocations?

Vocation and Career in SAF

Mr Abdul Samad (Nominated Member): Chairman, I am heartened by Minister's response to my Parliamentary Question on the subject matter for vocation and choice for our NSFs. The examples he shared ranges from air defence, artillery, intelligence, island defence signals and transport. This certainly makes the NS period more meaningful for Singaporeans who got their vocation choices, instead of dragging their soles to report back to camp during the duration of NS. I am speaking on this from my own personal experience in the past when I served my NS.

Can Minister enlighten if any NSFs have decided to pursue a career in MINDEF when they were posted to their choice vocation? What is the probability of NSFs having a career in combat as compared to non-combat related?

With regard to transport that was mentioned in his response, does this include engine technicians or the equivalent? What kind of career can the NSF look forward to, should they choose to be in engineering as compared to combat?

Finally, does MINDEF provides any Work-Study Diploma opportunity for NSF enlistees that come from Institutes of Technical Education (ITEs)? I believe that the sophisticated combat vehicles can entice young Singaporeans to take the opportunity to have hands-on experience in the engines of such vehicles.

Expertise-based Redeployment

Mr Gan Thiam Poh: Chairman, I was heartened to hear last year that the number of expertise-based redeployments had gone up significantly in 2022. Allowing NSmen to use their civilian expertise to contribute to national defence should provide for a more effective SAF and a better NS experience.

After serving their NS, many Singaporeans go on to fulfilling careers in various specialisations, some of which may be valuable to the SAF. We should consider how best to tap on their skillsets and specialisations, and enable them to make better use of their time during their ORNS.

Would MINDEF share an update on whether the number of expertise-based redeployments has gone up and in which areas are they contributing to?

Digitalisation of NS Systems

Mr Lim Biow Chuan (Mountbatten): Sir, the past three years of the COVID-19 pandemic have been trying for all of us, but we have also made significant technology-related gains during this period. Many Singaporeans now enjoy the flexibility of remote working and catching up with friends online has become more commonplace.

Many NSmen use their mobile phones connect to their family, to their friends and colleagues. And these phones also serve as their calendars, wallets, bus and MRT cards. I would say not just NSmen, but all of us as well.

But for many of our young NSmen, the digital life is the only life they have ever known. Given that our NSmen devote precious time to serve the nation, it is necessary for MINDEF to make the best use of technology to ensure that the NS' administrative processes are efficient and convenient. So, may I ask how is MINDEF leveraging technology to improve NS administrative processes – particularly to cater to the preferences of a young and digitally-savvy generation of NSmen?

Updates on OneNS Platform

Ms Poh Li San (Sembawang): Chairman, our NSmen make many sacrifices to defend our nation, while they juggle NS obligations with the other demands in their work and family lives. Ensuring an efficient and convenient NS Experience would be most helpful to them. I appreciate the OneNS initiative which seeks to achieve this goal by centralising NS transactions and services, such as SMART Information and Communications Technology (ICT) onto this one-stop platform.

I understand that OneNS can anticipate the needs of each individual serviceman and personalise digital services, so that each can have easy access to relevant information and services in a timely manner.

OneNS was rolled out in the second half of last year. Would MINDEF share the feedback and experience from its users and assess how much difference this platform has made to the NS experience?

Updates on NS55

Mr Mohd Fahmi Aliman (Marine Parade): Sir, since 1967, NS has been the cornerstone of our defence, as well as the rite of passage for Singaporean males, shaping them from "Ah Boys to Men". The NS experience not only consists of two years' full-time service but also regular reservist call-ups in the years that follow, to ensure that the NSmen's skills and knowledge remains relevant and current. It is also a whole-of-society endeavour because families and employers play a huge role to support our NSFs and NSmen whenever they are required to answer their call of duty. Most importantly, NS is about strengthening Singaporean's commitment and ability to defend and protect Singapore.

To mark the 55th anniversary of NS last year, MINDEF organised a series of activities to recognise the contributions of our NS past and present. The activities were designed to raise awareness of NS, promote fitness, and highlight the sacrifices and dedication of NSmen over the past 55 years. The NS55 celebrations also provided an opportunity for the nation to come together to show its support and gratitude to NSmen and their families.

Can MINDEF provide an update on how Singaporeans have responded to these activities and whether these activities had achieved its objectives?

Initiatives to Recognise and Support NSmen

Mr Chong Kee Hiong (Bishan-Toa Payoh): Chairman, last year, we commemorated 55 years of NS. This was a meaningful opportunity to pay tribute to the contributions of our past and present NSmen. Their contributions and personal sacrifices have ensured the SAF has remained strong, and have kept Singapore safe and secure.

While NS55 activities have concluded, recognition and support for our NSmen should continue. Our Singaporean sons devote two full years of their time, away from their families and loved ones, for the defence of Singapore. They put their studies and career aspirations on hold and serve with passion and commitment. After full-time NS, our NSmen continue to make sacrifices juggling family, work and NS commitments.

I was, therefore, glad to hear that the NS Review Committee had prioritised recognition and support for our NSmen as one of the Committee's three thrusts. I appreciated that Senior Minister of State for Defence Mr Heng Chee How talked about NS recognition in his COS speech last year, including about the enhancement of the NS HOME awards.

What are MINDEF and the SAF doing to ensure that our NSmen continue to feel appreciated for their contributions to our national defence? How can MINDEF and the SAF better support our NSmen's families as well?

Reducing Administration Processes for NS

Ms Yeo Wan Ling (Pasir Ris-Punggol): I would first like to thank our NSmen for being a key pillar of Singapore's national defence. It is important for us to ensure that NSmen and their families are supported and recognised for their sacrifices. We should not take these contributions for granted.

Today, NSmen have to balance their professional and personal lives alongside their NS commitments during their reservist years. Some of them even have to set aside life milestones.

Our growing freelance and self-employed workforce often face livelihood losses for each day that they are away from work and, hence, steps to alleviate unnecessary administrative processes will go a long way in helping with the balancing of their commitments. We should seek to continually improve the NS system, so that each and every NS man can have fulfilling and meaningful NS experiences. We should strive to increase conveniences for our NSmen by reducing administrative burdens for them where possible, without compromising on SAF's operational readiness.

One instance of this was in 2019 when Senior Minister of State Mr Heng Chee How announced that ORNS would no longer have to notify the authorities when they travel abroad for less than half a year. Could MINDEF provide an update on whether a review is timely this year, given that four years have passed since the last announcement?

Russia-Ukraine – Lessons on Total Defence

Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim: Sir, it has been one year since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war. In the war's early days, the world watched with bated breath as the machinery of Russian warfare rolled into Ukraine. Would the Ukrainians be able to hold, and if so, for how long, how many days? Many feared that Ukraine faced overwhelming odds.

One year on, however, the Ukrainians have defied the strong odds against them. Soldiers have fought bravely and valiantly on the battlefield to preserve the sovereignty and territorial integrity of their homeland.

But we have to look beyond the traditional battlefield too. Indeed, the total attack nature of modern warfare today has expanded the realm of the traditional battlefield. Wars are no longer just conflicts between armies, but between nations and their peoples, and how to break their spirit and psychological unity.

On this count, the Ukrainian people have, too, fought bravely against the chaos, destruction and horrors of war. Instead of buckling under pressure, the Ukrainians came together and rose to the occasion. Tales of Ukrainians from all walks of life banding together have hit the headlines time and again, displaying inspiring acts of heroism, resourcefulness and ingenuity. From engineers building portable stoves out of old refrigerator parts to fend off the cold amid power outages, to housewives fashioning makeshift but effective tourniquets and weaving camouflage nets as covers for military vehicles and soldiers.

In light of these developments in Ukraine, could MINDEF share the key Total Defence takeaways from the Russia-Ukraine conflict for Singapore?

Singaporean actor Ix Shen, who was living in Ukraine, recounted how Ukrainians who lined up in a supermarket to stock up on necessities made way for soldiers and gave them words of encouragement.

The Chairman: Ms Rachel Ong. Take your two cuts, please.

Relatability of Total Defence

Miss Rachel Ong (West Coast): Chairman, at the COS debate last year, Senior Minister of State for Defence, Mr Zaqy Mohamad shared that a "2021 Total Defence Review" was undertaken and had reflected sentiments of Singaporeans wanting space to contribute ideas and efforts towards shaping Singapore's Total Defence.

11.30 am

During the same debate, I also raised the question on how we can continue to engage our youth in defence matters. The Senior Minister of State then shared about the launch of the Total Defence Sandbox.

May I ask MINDEF for an update on the progress of the Total Defence Sandbox, as well as the follow-up on the suggestions and recommendations put forth by Singaporeans as part of the Total Defence Review. Also, the plans to ensure that Total Defence remains relatable and resonate with all Singaporeans?

Boosting Community Resilience

An important goal of Total Defence is to build resilient communities; communities that are able to withstand, respond and bounce back quickly from adverse situations. This has never been more critical in this era of uncertainty; politically, economically and also in the form of natural disasters.

There are examples we can look to, which showcase the strength of a community banding together. As shared by some, the Ukrainian people have been a remarkable example of a people coming together to not only defend their country, but innovate in the face of great difficulty.

Tech professionals in Ukraine used their talents to aid the nation's efforts and support humanitarian needs amid the crisis, such as creating apps that notify users about bombings or supporting humanitarian needs. Civilians with tech know-how found creative ways to adapt commercially, and to build drones and materials for military use. Businesses like Headway, a Ukrainian start-up, continued operating from bomb shelters in the midst of air raids, successfully offering bite-sized learning on an app used by 15 million people in over 140 countries. Others continue to attend and showcase their new innovations at international trade shows.

In the words of a startup founder from Ukraine, Mr Nazar Trokhymchuk: "the militaries are fighting, Ukrainian business is working, start-ups are developing, so everyone is doing their job".

I imagine that any crisis that hits Singapore shores, from either traditional or emerging threats, would demand a similar type of collective resilience, in order for us to bounce back stronger after each crisis. Therefore, may I ask MINDEF for updates on how MINDEF has bolstered community resilience through various initiatives under the Total Defence umbrella.

Community Partnership

Miss Cheng Li Hui (Tampines): Chairman, every Singaporean has a part to play in our whole-of-society effort to build a strong, secure and cohesive nation. New threats continuously emerge, while existing threats evolve and re-invent themselves. The addition of Digital Defence is timely, which forms the sixth pillar of Total Defence. How has MINDEF partnered the community to strengthen Total Defence?

Civic Preparedness through Total Defence

Mr Chong Kee Hiong: Chairman, last year, the World Economic Forum recognised the contributions of one Ukrainian, Fedir Serdiuk, who had founded the First Aid Special Training, or FAST, organisation in 2016 to provide first aid training to ordinary Ukrainians. His organisation has reportedly trained more than 50,000 Ukrainians with the skills needed to render first aid, which has been particularly useful amidst the current hostilities.

I hope that Singaporeans continue to be inspired by such stories and that more Singaporeans are encouraged to learn about how they can prepare themselves to respond in the event of a national crisis.

How is MINDEF working with other agencies to enhance Singaporeans' civic preparedness? What are the measures planned to increase participation and the range of skills learnt by each participant?

Preparing Singapore for Crises

Ms Denise Phua Lay Peng (Jalan Besar): Chairman, the global crises in the last two years served as important reminders that the people of Singapore need to be prepared to step up and respond in the event that we face crises. Let me cite three cases for illustration.

One, the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has shown the importance of prepared and willing citizens who are able to not only respond to challenges such as food and energy shortages, but also resourceful enough to put lifesaving skills and other civil defence responses into practice, to save their own lives and that of other citizens.

Two, the COVID-19 pandemic, where not only our healthcare, border security and livelihoods were put to the test, but also the spread of misinformation and disinformation to make things worse.

Three, the recent massive earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, causing thousands dead and missing, and millions displaced.

Situations caused by geopolitical conflicts, health and natural disasters. Singapore has not and will not be spared from such disruptions to their lives. We are even more vulnerable because we are a small-nation state and have to punch above our weight to ensure we will not be defeated and will emerge stronger than ever. It is, hence, vital that we prepare Singaporeans adequately and in advance for emergencies – from having sufficient essential supplies for our people, to giving timely and correct information to together navigate through such crises.

What has MINDEF done, and will do, to better prepare Singaporeans for future crises? How will it muster the strong resources it has and collaborate and align with other Government Ministries, ground agencies and volunteers, to ensure that we can band together during tough times?

The Chairman: Mr Seah Kian Peng. Not here. Ms Joan Pereira.

ACCORD

Ms Joan Pereira (Tanjong Pagar): Chairman, I am heartened to note that MINDEF and SAF continue to engage the community and key stakeholders to understand the challenges, constraints and opportunities faced by our people and businesses. Such engagements will go a long way to help boost the public support for defence and enable Singaporeans to better understand defence issues, so that they can play a more active role in building a resilient society.

Over the years, the Advisory Council on Community Relations in Defence (ACCORD) has provided an invaluable avenue for MINDEF and SAF to receive feedback and proposals. Last year, Senior Minister of State for Defence Mr Zaqy Mohamad provided an update on the various ACCORD initiatives, including ACCORD's focus on engaging youth and women on defence issues.

Would MINDEF provide an update on the various initiatives that ACCORD has been working on recently?

ACCORD and Community Support for NS

Dr Wan Rizal (Jalan Besar): Chairman, our NSmen form the backbone of Singapore's defence and work tirelessly every day to ensure that they are always ready to respond to any current and future threat against Singapore.

Yet, the continued strength of our defence cannot be predicated on the individual soldier alone. For a NS man to carry out his duties effectively and with commitment, the support of his community and family is essential. Singaporeans from every part of our society must continue to also show appreciation for the hard work that they put in.

ACCORD plays an integral role, by reaching out to individuals from all walks of life, to strengthen their commitment to defence. ACCORD must continue its efforts to engage individuals, corporations and community groups, to mobilise support for defence issues, especially for NS.

Could MINDEF thus update the House on ACCORD's initiatives and how it has encouraged community support for defence issues, particularly, with regards to NS?

Singapore Discovery Centre

Mr Lim Biow Chuan: The Singapore Discovery Centre (SDC) is about who we are and what we want to be. I am glad that almost two decades on from its last major revamp, the SDC continues to keep Singapore's history alive for our children and grandchildren, and to be a place for interactive learning.

Over the past two years, Senior Minister of State for Defence, Mr Zaqy Mohamad, has updated the House about plans to refresh and transform the SDC. If we do an Internet search on SDC, it currently looks like a tourist attraction, but surely, it must be more than a tourist site.

May I ask MINDEF, what can visitors expect at the SDC today? How can we use the centre to help our children learn more about our history, and also about our future?

Military Museums

Mr Melvin Yong Yik Chye (Radin Mas): Mr Chairman, a shared sense of belonging is key to a country's identity. Central to this is a collective understanding and appreciation that citizens have of our country's history.

We recently celebrated Total Defence Day on 15 February. For many young Singaporeans, it might have seemed like just any other day, except for the public warning siren that was played on that day. In case we forget, Total Defence Day is commemorated on the day that Singapore fell during World War II. It is a day to remind ourselves of the lessons from that dark chapter of Singapore's history – that the responsibility to defend our nation lies with all of us.

It is, therefore, crucial that lessons from such key historical moments are passed down to future generations of Singaporeans, who will naturally feel increasingly distanced from long ago events that have shaped our nation. To this end, museums are a good medium.

When my children were younger, I used to bring them to places, such as the Battlebox and the Army Museum, to help them relate to what it was like living at a time where safety could not be taken for granted. I would like to ask if the Ministry tracks the visitorship of our various military museums and whether younger Singaporeans have been visiting them? Are there any upcoming plans to revamp these military museums to enhance their appeal to our younger generation?

The Chairman: Senior Minister of State Heng Chee How.

The Senior Minister of State for Defence (Mr Heng Chee How): Mr Chairman, Minister for Defence, Dr Ng, said in his speech, that defence is a long-term business requiring consistent investment over time. Aside from building a capable armed forces that can serve as a deterrence and defend us against threats, MINDEF works hard on defence diplomacy and cooperation – both bilateral and multilateral - to build defence ties and address common security challenges.

Mr Shawn Huang and Mr Zhulkarnain asked about this. Let me cite two examples. As Dr Ng had updated the House last year, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) had agreed to establish the ADMM Cybersecurity and Information Centre of Excellence (ACICE) in Singapore. This Centre promotes research and information sharing among partner nations on emerging cybersecurity and informational threats. ACICE has started sharing products with all partner nations. The construction of ACICE's physical centre is also underway and we expect a formal launch in the third quarter of this year.

The second example is that of the Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD). After a two-year hiatus, the SLD resumed last year in a physical format. SLD22 was a successful event that was well-attended by 37 ministerial-level delegates, including from both the US and China. The SLD remains the premier defence and security conference in Asia and provides a venue to affirm mutually beneficial principles and to allow for dialogue, if not build trust. We look forward to commemorating the 20th edition of the SLD this year, where Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has agreed to give the keynote address.

Beyond investing in a strong SAF and defence diplomacy, we have continuously invested in and evolved the NS system. NS is the cornerstone of our defence and national security. NSmen form the bulk of the SAF, the Police and Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF). Their sacrifices and commitment lay the foundation for Singapore's security and prosperity. It is critical that we continuously maintain and strengthen the NS system.

Here, I am happy to inform the House that public support for NS remains very strong. In one of MINDEF's surveys conducted among Singaporeans late last year, more than 98% of the respondents said that NS was necessary for Singapore's security, both now and in the future. It shows that Singaporeans understand that small states are inherently vulnerable, that we need to take responsibility for our own defence and that NS remains, I would say more than relevant – it remains critical.

This outcome does not come by chance. MINDEF and the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) make regular efforts to strengthen the NS system and recognise the contributions of our national servicemen. Last year, the NS Review Committee (NSRC) submitted recommendations to ensure that NS remained effective amidst Singapore's evolving defence needs, as well as the changing needs of our NSmen. We also commemorated 55 years of NS (NS55). Today, I will provide an update on these efforts.

To recap, the NSRC's recommendations can be grouped into three broad thrusts. First, maximising the contributions of servicemen. Second, improving the NS experience. And third, enhancing recognition and support. With your permission, Mr Chairman, may I ask the Clerks to distribute a handout on the NSRC initiatives, which Members may refer to.

11.45 am

The Chairman: Please do. *[A handout was distributed to hon Members. Please refer to [Annex 1](#).]*

Mr Heng Chee How: Members may also access the handout through the MP@SGPARL mobile app.

Mr Patrick Tay asked about MINDEF's efforts to optimise the deployment of NSmen to maximise their contributions.

Given low fertility rates and shrinking cohort sizes, the SAF needs to optimise the contributions of every soldier – in two ways. The first concerns medical fitness and job requirements. To complement our existing medical screening process, we introduced functional assessments for pre-enlistees with selected orthopaedic conditions. Mr Gan Thiam Poh asked for an update on this.

Under this functional assessment, we assess the pre-enlistee's ability to do physical tasks, such as running, jumping and carrying heavy loads. This approach allows us to accurately match more servicemen to operational roles as compared to the traditional approach of matching servicemen based only on their medical diagnosis.

To date, 100 pre-enlistees with certain orthopaedic conditions have undergone such functional assessments and 75 have been found to be fit to be deployed to a wider range of operational roles than before. At the same time, we are leveraging technology to redesign jobs. Similarly, this enables more servicemen to be deployed into operational roles.

Since 2021, the SAF has redesigned 1,300 jobs in vocations, such as Medics, Infantry Carrier Vehicle Operators and Transport Operators, opening them up to more servicemen. The SAF is on track to do the same for another 500 jobs by the middle of this year, and that will bring it from 1,300, to 1,800 jobs.

The second way is to maximise contributions that concern knowledge and skills. To keep up with the changing nature of conflict and emerging threats, the SAF needs to grow and tap the skills of our NSmen. In this, we have made good progress.

I have updated the House in recent years about Work-Learn Schemes for NSF, a subject which Mr Don Wee asked about. Mr Abdul Samad also asked about career pathways in the SAF related to engineering.

Under the Work-Learn Schemes, NSF, attain a diploma or partial university credits from Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs) while performing a period of full-time NS followed by regular service. They are trained in domains, such as artificial intelligence, supply chain management and engineering, which allows them to be deployed as digital specialists, supply supervisors and technicians respectively.

Two months ago, we also introduced a new scheme for NSF, to pursue Diplomas in Engineering (Mechanical Technology) and be deployed as Naval Warfare System Specialists.

Overall, 450 NSF, have enrolled in such Work-Learn Schemes so far. By 2025, we expect 500 NSF, to be enrolled in Work-Learn Schemes every year.

Our efforts to maximise expertise cover not only NSF, but also NSmen.

Some of our NSmen have skills that the SAF needs, which they have acquired in their civilian careers. The SAF has stepped up efforts to identify and redeploy these NSmen to make better use of their civilian expertise and skills.

Mr Gan Thiam Poh asked for an update on the results. The results have been encouraging.

Over the past year, the SAF has redeployed 200 NSmen under the Enhanced Expertise Deployment Scheme. This represents a four-fold increase from the average number of 50 NSmen a year between 2014 and 2021. New areas to which NSmen were redeployed last year included digital and intelligence, logistics and engineering.

While optimising deployment is important, we also need to make NS processes more seamless, so that our national servicemen can focus on their training. Mr Lim Biow Chuan and Ms Yeo Wan Ling asked about this.

This brings me to the second thrust of the NSRC's recommendations – that of improving the NS experience.

A major administrative burden for employers and NSmen had been the filing of Make-Up Pay claims for In-Camp Training (ICT). In the past, this was done manually. Entries were, therefore, sometimes incomplete and payment delays happened.

In September last year, we introduced an automated system that draws income-related information from the Central Provident Fund (CPF) Board and Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore (IRAS) to calculate Make-Up Pay amounts. If they so wish, employers and NSmen can review the computed amounts and file for adjustments. Otherwise, the amounts will be paid out automatically and there is no action needed on their part.

As a result, we have had very positive feedback. The claim amounts derived from CPF Board and IRAS data have proven to be up to date and accurate. Since September, 92% of claims have been processed automatically. Based on our estimates, the automated system will save employers, NSmen, MINDEF and the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) more than 260,000 man-hours of processing effort every year.

Apart from saving time, the automation has also allowed us to make payment much faster. Since September, 90% of claims have been paid within 10 days from the start of in-camp training (ICT). Practically, the payment is processed while people may still be undergoing their period of ICT.

Alongside this automated system, we also introduced a base NS pay of \$1,600 per month whenever NSmen attend ICT or other ORNS activities. This means that if the data from CPF Board or IRAS indicates that an NSman earns less than \$1,600 per month, MINDEF will top up his NS Pay to \$1,600 per month, prorated according to the duration of the ORNS activity. As an example, if an NSman attends a 12-day ICT, on a prorated basis of a base pay of \$1,600, he would be paid at least \$600.

This provides additional support to NSmen who are students or who are not employed or whose income from informal jobs may not be fully captured in CPF or IRAS data. We hope that this gives NSmen from lower-income segments greater financial security when they attend ORNS activities.

On this, I just want to reiterate the point that MINDEF is fully committed to the well-being and welfare of both our NSFs and NSmen. Through so many examples that we have given, the public can be confident that we will regularly update such benefits, in order to take good care of our servicemen.

Our efforts to digitalise NS transactions and touchpoints go beyond Make-Up Pay claims.

Members who are NSmen would remember receiving physical vouchers from MINDEF and MHA in the past as part of our recognition efforts. Since 2021, we have replaced cash and voucher-based NS recognition benefits with digital credits disbursed through the LifeSG mobile app.

With the change, national servicemen are now able to receive, carry and redeem their credits via their mobile devices. The credits can be used with any business that accepts payment by NETS or PayNow QR. Some businesses also offer our servicemen discounts for the use of the credits as a show of support for NS. When they do so, this has effectively further raised the dollar value of the benefits.

As part of the NS55 Recognition Package, \$100 worth of credits were distributed electronically in July last year to more than a million NSmen past and present. When we checked in mid-February 2023, the 136,000 NSmen who had rated the NS55 redemption eService on LifeSG app had given it an average of 4.8 out of five stars.

Over the past seven months, 76% of NSmen have started using or have already used their credits fully. This is a relevant piece of data because it shows that when it is made available to be used electronically, it makes it much more convenient and it speeds up the utilisation and the enjoyment of the benefit. In comparison, it took 18 months to achieve the same use for physical vouchers when we did that for NS50. I encourage all national servicemen to fully utilise your credits.

Ms Poh Li San asked about the use of the OneNS platform to improve the NS experience. The OneNS platform is a consolidation of NS-related services and transactions into a single mobile app. We rolled out the first phase of OneNS to selected ICT units. NSmen in these units can register their attendance at ICT easily with the geolocation function on the app. This has allowed the units concerned to start the proper ICT programme earlier. OneNS will be extended to more units in the coming months.

I now move on to the third thrust, which is that of enhancing recognition and support for NSmen, something which Mr Chong Kee Hiong asked about.

Last year, we conducted a year-long NS55 campaign themed "Generations of Strength". Mr Mohd Fahmi asked about the response to that campaign. Besides giving the NS55 Recognition Package to eligible NSmen, MINDEF and MHA organised a series of commemorative initiatives that was well received.

As an example, the NS55 theme song "Back in the Day" accumulated over six million views online. The showcase at the Army Open House on the evolution of NS attracted 140,000 visitors. The community came together to organise activities such as walking alongside our NSmen under the NS55 Fitness Challenge.

All in all, the NS55 campaign achieved its objectives. Surveys conducted after the campaign showed that 80% of our NSmen felt valued for their contributions to NS. And 90% of the general public felt that NS was a source of pride for Singapore.

NS55 may have concluded but our efforts to recognise and support our NSmen and their families continue. In fact, we can already look forward to the opening of the new Singapore Armed Forces Reservist Association (SAFRA) clubhouse in Choa Chu Kang in May this year. That will bring an exciting host of amenities, especially to the 90,000 NSmen who reside in the northwest. I think many of us might have seen the exciting photos of my colleague, Senior Minister of State Zaqy's recent hard-hat tour of the upcoming facilities. So, look out for that.

Beyond recognition benefits, MINDEF and MHA are also committed to strengthening financial protection for SAF and Home Team servicemen and volunteers. In January, we doubled the coverage for the Group Term Life and Group Personal Accident insurance, up from \$150,000 to \$300,000. We have also extended the coverage to conditions, such as long-term hearing damage and decompression sickness. It is, therefore, fitting that the Group Personal Accident insurance is now called Group Personal Injury insurance – to reflect that extended coverage.

I have covered the three thrusts of the NSRC but these are not our only priorities.

The SAF will always pay particular attention to safe and effective training of our NSmen. Mr Desmond Choo and Mr Henry Kwek had asked about this.

We are investing heavily in our training infrastructure. Minister for Defence Dr Ng had spoken about how SAFTI City will allow our NSmen to undergo realistic training for a wide range of scenarios as well as the SAF's plans to leverage technology, including simulators and real-time sensors, to enhance training. The development of expanded overseas training areas, including those in Australia, will also allow our NSmen to have more opportunities to participate in large-scale, integrated training.

While training must be realistic to be effective, we will never compromise on safety. Mr Saktiandi Supaat asked about how the SAF balances safety and training effectiveness.

Sharing of safety practices and co-development of safety management plans have always been an important part of training exercises that SAF conducts, both for itself as well as with other military forces.

12.00 pm

Representatives from the SAF also attend international defence safety conferences, in order to share experiences and also to gain insights on safety benchmarks and practices. These are then put into reviews and revisions of safety standards to further enhance them where appropriate.

The 3rd ERPSS, which began its three-year term in 2021, noted that the SAF had comprehensive systems to ensure the safety and health of our soldiers during training. This assessment was made after the Panel visited key SAF training schools and an overseas training exercise over the past two years.

Miss Cheng Li Hui asked about audit findings and learning points. The SAF Inspector-General's Office recently completed its second audit cycle across all SAF formations. The audit findings show that the SAF's safety management systems remain robust despite the ramp-up of training over the past year following pandemic-related disruptions.

I announced last year that the SAF was developing an Enterprise Safety Information System (ESIS). It has been fully adopted in the SAF, allowing quick spreading of safety lessons and easy submission of near misses and incidents by personnel across all ranks. The system enhances commanders' awareness and decision-making, in order to better prevent accidents. The SAF will continue to invest resources and harness technology to strengthen our safety culture.

This concludes my update on the implementation of initiatives in our priority areas. Work in these areas will never end and we will continue to look for new ways to strengthen the NS system and recognise our NSmen.

With that, I am now pleased to make two announcements.

First, in an effort to improve NS processes further, we have reviewed exit controls for NSmen and concluded that we are able to further relax them. From April this year onwards, NSmen will only need to apply for an Exit Permit when they leave Singapore for 12 months or more, up from the current six months or more. This change reflects the growing mobility of Singaporeans, with many of our NSmen staying or working overseas for longer durations.

Let me assure Members that we have studied this very carefully and the SAF's operational readiness will not be affected as a result of this change.

Second, in appreciation of the contributions of our national servicemen, the National Service Resort and Country Club (NSRCC) will be building a social and recreation hub that will come with chalets, sports facilities and other family-centric amenities. More details will be announced in due course. We hope that this effort – to build this hub and enhance our services to NSmen – will cater even better to the leisure needs of a younger generation of NSmen.

Mr Chairman, we need an effective NS in order to safeguard our security and our sovereignty. We must build on the contributions of previous generations, take care of our NSmen and ensure that NS is well-positioned to safeguard our way of life into the future.

The Chairman: Minister of State Zaqy Mohamad.

The Senior Minister of State for Defence (Mr Zaqy Mohamad): Mr Chairman, Minister for Defence Dr Ng Eng Hen and Senior Minister of State Mr Heng Chee How spoke at some length about the importance of investing steadily in a strong defence.

They stressed the importance of long-term investments in building up our military capabilities and strengthening our NS system, even during times of relative peace. I would add that we also need steady investment in Singaporeans' commitment to defence and our collective national resilience. This underpins our Total Defence philosophy that we started in 1984.

Total Defence has helped us through crises in the past and the most recent COVID-19 pandemic. It is even more needed now to prepare all Singaporeans to withstand ongoing disruptions, to defend against the multitude of threats that lie ahead and for us to continue to thrive.

Looking back on the past year's challenges, the Russia-Ukraine war resonates with me because it shows precisely why Total Defence remains critical for Singapore's survival.

The world has been awed by the sheer courage and ingenuity of Ukrainians in their spirited fight against Russia. Member of Parliament Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim and Ms Denise Phua, as well as others highlighted this. And I think there is much we can learn from how the whole-of-Ukrainian society mobilised for its national defence.

In an inspiring display of Civil and Psychological Defence, many Ukrainian individuals and businesses have volunteered their civilian support for the military effort.

In the same month that Russia launched its full-scale invasion, a historian began making improvised bulletproof vests for soldiers, by taping sawed-off pieces of ploughshares and cut-up transmission belts from farming machines onto sleeveless dress jackets. Then, local business owners, specialising in everything from furniture to metalwork, came together to properly manufacture bullet-proof jackets sewn

with camouflage fabric and tool pouches. Bullet-proof jackets are common apparel in Ukraine now. There are reports of farmers wearing them while working fields that are peppered with unexploded munitions, and parents preparing them for children in the event of evacuations.

We also see the interplay between Military, Civil and Digital Defence in how Ukrainians have applied their computer and information technology expertise to help counter Russia's aerial attacks.

To overcome limitations in their air defence system, Ukrainian volunteers worked with military and government officials to develop a mobile phone application that allows civilians to report sightings of incoming drones and missiles. Users only needed to point their device in the direction of the incoming object and press a button, and the application would send a report to the military, who would attempt to intercept the object before it struck.

Demonstrating their social and psychological resilience, millions of Ukrainians have returned home since the war began, despite there being no clear resolution to the conflict in sight. Some are men who worked overseas and wanted to enlist to defend their country. Others are seniors, women and children who wanted to rebuild their homes and their communities.

Their display of Social and Psychological Defence prompts me to reflect on the strength of our national identity and resilience. I hope that we never have to come to this. But should crisis arise and the country need us, Singaporeans must stand united and stay to defend our country. One people, one nation, one Singapore.

Over the past two years, we have been engaging different groups of Singaporeans to strengthen Total Defence. Member Miss Rachel Ong asked about how MINDEF has followed up on our 2021 Total Defence Review.

Through our review, we have identified two key priorities. The first is to help Singaporeans become more aware about the threats and challenges for our society, which would serve as a stepping-stone towards understanding how they can contribute to tackling these challenges. The second is to give Singaporeans more opportunities to propose Total Defence initiatives and to partner the government to implement these initiatives.

In this spirit, we launched the Total Defence Sandbox last year, to crowdsource proposals from youths to put Total Defence into action.

In the first round of submissions, we received 77 enthusiastic proposals, and have selected some proposals to implement this year. For example, university students Mr Caleb Tan and Mr Sheng Jiankai drew on their love of crime fiction to propose an immersive Total Defence Murder Mystery Role Play Game to help players learn about our multifaceted threat environment. Mr Tan said that through their game, they hoped that young Singaporeans would become more aware of the challenges and limitations that Singapore faces, and feel the urgency to take tangible actions for Total Defence. We think that their idea is fresh and engaging, and have partnered them with the SDC to bring their game to life.

We are looking for more creative contributions from Singaporeans. Our second call for proposals to the Sandbox has just commenced and will run until May of this year.

Chairman, we want to deter crises and conflict. However, when crisis hits, we must be prepared. The Government will spare no effort in our response, but the Government also cannot be everywhere all the time. This is where Singaporeans, all of us, must play our part to pitch in to support national efforts, as well as to take care of each other.

Members Miss Rachel Ong, Miss Cheng Li Hui, Mr Chong Kee Hiong and Ms Denise Phua asked how MINDEF was partnering other agencies and the community to bolster community resilience and civic preparedness.

Through the Total Defence Sandbox, a group of Singapore Management University (SMU) students proposed to conduct a table-top simulation to engage post-secondary students on Total Defence.

We saw the potential of this idea and brought together Government agencies, grassroots organisations, education institutions and businesses to develop a full-fledged Community Exercise involving over 120 participants, as part of the 2023 Total Defence Day Commemoration Event. The exercise was conducted over two days in Chua Chu Kang Community Club, where members of the local community came together to draw up plans to prepare for and respond to disruptions of essential supplies.

Visitors to the Total Defence Day Commemoration Event also learned about facilities and skills that are essential for civic preparedness. To show people that they can still prepare good food in the event of a shortage of fresh food, the ITE College West served nutritious meals that were cooked using ingredients with long shelf lives.

In preparation for water-related emergencies, the Public Utilities Board (PUB) had booths to educate the public on water conservation and flood resilience. Residents were invited to try out PUB's mobile Water Bag Filling Machine, which can pack five-litre water bags for distribution in the event of water supply disruptions. So, this is a lot faster and quicker than what we used to remember – pail carrying and long queues.

Some activities took place in the Civil Defence Shelter in the Community Centre, which is part of a longstanding shelter programme by the SCDF to protect civilians during natural and man-made disasters, as well as wartime emergencies. The SCDF also conducted public demonstrations of critical life-saving skills, such as cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and fire extinguishing.

I am pretty inspired by how an idea that started in the Total Defence Sandbox evolved into a comprehensive and inclusive community effort with the close support of partners.

Every Singaporean can build up their crisis preparedness by getting certified with life-saving skills and learning how they should prepare for and respond in emergencies. We hope to encourage more people to undertake these actions, and we are working with the People's Association and ITE College West to conduct the exercise with Singaporeans from more walks of life.

We are also exploring new and more engaging ways to encourage youths to learn about Total Defence. One way is through the Total Defence Interactive Videos, which are available on the MINDEF and SG101 websites.

The latest video, launched just last month, follows a friendly and comical grandmother and grandson duo as they try to tackle modern challenges such as supply disruptions and fake news. Viewers role-play as the video characters and make decisions that determine how the story unfolds. Through the videos, we hope that viewers reflect on how their individual choices can create a greater impact in the national context.

School activities also provide valuable platforms for youths to learn about defence and security issues. For example, most of us are familiar with the National Cadet Corps (NCC). Some of us may have been part of the NCC when we were in school. I, for one, was an NCC cadet too, at one point. Like many students over the years, this gave me early exposure to Total Defence and prepared me with relevant skills for NS. For some, NCC also seeded aspirations for a career in the military.

Today, we continue this tradition of actively engaging students and are piloting a new programme to empower youths to act in Singapore's Digital Defence.

12.15 pm

Our fourth service, the Digital and Intelligence Service (DIS), launched the Sentinel Programme last year to equip youths with digital and cybersecurity skills. Students from participating secondary schools, junior colleges and polytechnics were offered hands-on workshops, engagement sessions and competitions. The programme was carefully crafted to expose students to foundational skills, such as basic programming, cryptography and network forensics.

We received strong student interest in the pilot programme, and are working with other agencies, such as the Cyber Security Agency of Singapore (CSA), to offer the programme to students from all secondary schools, junior colleges, polytechnics and ITEs in the coming years.

NS is fundamental to our Military Defence, as outlined by Senior Minister of State Heng Chee How. In turn, community support is critical for the continued success of NS. We established the ACCORD in 1984 to bring together community nodes that represent employers, educational institutions, family members and members of the wider community.

ACCORD has grown tremendously and continues to contribute valuable feedback and proposals. Members Ms Joan Pereira and Dr Wan Rizal asked for updates on ACCORD's initiatives, such as efforts to increase community support for NS.

In the past year, ACCORD actively rallied the community to show appreciation for our NSmen through the We Support NS Campaign. The campaign garnered discounts and benefits for NSmen at 275 retailers that operate a total of 2,500 outlets across Singapore.

In addition, ACCORD remains passionate about preparing youths and their families for NS. ACCORD co-organised NS engagement sessions for over 11,000 students from post-secondary education institutions in the past year and most agreed that the sessions helped them better prepare for NS.

We also wanted to give women a glimpse of what NSmen go through, so that they can better support and advocate for NS and Total Defence. With this in mind, ACCORD partnered with the SAF to host another edition of the Women's Boot Camp earlier this month.

Ms Koh Wee Min is an alumni of the 2019 Women's Boot Camp who returned to the most recent Boot Camp to support the camp trainers and share her experience. Ms Koh also initiated an NS55 project last year to plot the participating merchant outlets that offered We Support NS deals on a shared Google Map list. This allowed NSmen and their families to easily search for the deals. I think that she embodies the Total Defence spirit of playing your part, wherever you can.

We all have memories of what it means to play our own part for Singapore's defence. It may be something small, like taking pride in your Uniformed Group school unit achieving a Total Defence Gold Badge. Or maybe something more life-changing, like digging your first shell-scape in the humid jungle or hearing the buzz of mosquitoes as you are doing your sentry duties or sending your loved one off to Pulau Tekong for Basic Military Training (BMT). These memories of our achievements and sacrifices are precious threads in the hard-won tapestry of our national identity.

We believe in preserving these stories and artefacts across generations, so that we can learn about and reflect on the trials and tribulations that we have undergone as a fledgling nation and military. Members Mr Lim Biow Chuan and Mr Melvin Yong asked about the plans for our defence and military museums, and what visitors can expect. To bring our Singapore defence story to life and better preserve our heritage, we have set up the Defence Collective Singapore to oversee all our defence and military museums. This will help us deliver the best possible visitor experiences and national education programmes at our museums.

We have been refreshing our museums to ensure that the exhibition content is up to date, and that the visitor experience is interactive and educational.

The SDC completed a refresh a year ago, with new multisensory and digitally-enhanced exhibits on Singapore's past, present and future. Echoing the Singapore Green Plan 2030 and MINDEF's commitment to environmental sustainability, SDC is on track to achieve its ambitious sustainability target of becoming a net-zero energy building by this year.

The Navy Museum is undergoing a complete makeover of its galleries and will reopen to the public in the middle of the year. Spanning three floors, the refreshed museum uses multimedia and interactive exhibits to tell the story of the Navy's evolution from its humble beginnings to the professional, competent maritime force that it is today. It will also display real equipment from the Challenger-class submarines for the first time.

The NS Gallery at Marina Bay is being built within the new NS Square complex and remains on track to open by 2027.

Our NSmen have defended our land, airspace and seas over the decades, and we want to showcase Singapore's NS story and honour the contributions of our NSmen past and present. We will also progressively refresh the Army and Air Force Museums in the coming years. Collectively, visitorship numbers at our museums have been encouraging with over 400,000 visitors annually spanning our military museums and the SDC.

Mr Chairman, as its name suggests, Total Defence remains an all-encompassing, unceasing effort to strengthen ourselves, our communities and our nation. MINDEF will continue to invest in Total Defence, in partnership with fellow Singaporeans.

Total Defence is our best preparation for our best response to, and our best recovery from, the threats of today and tomorrow. We will withstand whatever comes that our way if every Singaporean steps up to play a part in our defence. [*Applause.*]

The Chairman: Clarifications, please.

Really? No clarifications? Mr Vikram Nair, would you like to withdraw your amendment? You have got lots of time, so you can go on.

Mr Vikram Nair (Sembawang): Thank you. I would like to thank Minister and Senior Ministers of State for sharing the plans for MINDEF. It looks like the House is supportive and it is being passed without clarification. So, I seek leave to withdraw my amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

The sum of \$17,128,091,700 for Head J ordered to stand part of the Main Estimates.

The sum of \$1,451,310,000 for Head J ordered to stand part of the Development Estimates.

COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY – HEAD N (MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS)

(A safe and secure nation in turbulent times)

US-China Rivalry

Mr Vikram Nair (Sembawang): Chairman, I beg to move, "That the total sum allocated for Head N of the Estimates be reduced by \$100."

A key source of geopolitical uncertainty is the growing United States (US)-China rivalry. The hope for many of us is that both the US and China find a way to co-exist together. As the two largest economic powers, their peaceful co-existence could allow Asia and the rest of the world to continue to prosper in peace.

Unfortunately, this rivalry seems to have grown and intensified over the years. Last year, US Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in the face of objections and threats of dire consequences from China. The message she wanted to send as clear – that the US stands firmly behind its ally, Taiwan. China responded with joint military exercises in the Taiwan straits and unprecedented missile overflights over Taiwan. While this rivalry had started out as a largely economic one, the risk of a military confrontation has suddenly also become more real.

The economic rivalry itself should not be underestimated. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, there was a wave of US investment into China and trade from China with the world blossomed. This was like a golden age for economic prosperity following the end of the Cold War.

The last few years though have marked a sharp reversal of this trend. As the rivalry between China and the US intensified, US companies have started leaving China. Amazon, Yahoo and Linked In are the latest companies to announce exits from China, following Google which exited more than a decade ago. Prior to this, other well-known names such as Macy's, Home Depot, eBay and Best Buy have entered and exited China.

The Chinese company Huawei was hit with restrictions in 2019 and China followed with its own restrictions on various US sectors. Individuals have also not been spared. Following US sanctions on Hong Kong lawmakers in the wake of the unrest there, China had responded with sanctions on US lawmakers too, including members of President Trump's administration and lawmakers, such as Senators Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz.

This rivalry has also manifested itself in the realm of critical technologies. For example, the US last year imposed restrictions on the sales of advanced semiconductor chips, especially those with wide applications in artificial intelligence (AI) to China. While these measures are not targeted at Singapore, our semiconductor industry could potentially be impacted, given the highly complex nature of semi-conductor supply chains. In a more general dial-back of trade liberalisation, the last few years have seen both countries announce trade restrictions and sanctions against entities and individuals on both sides.

We can expect more intense and vigorous competition between both powers in the years ahead. What are the key risks and challenges for Singapore and the region arising from intensifying US-China competition?

Question proposed.

US-China Relations

Ms Tin Pei Ling (MacPherson): US-China relations are vital for regional peace and prosperity. Singapore has always welcome both countries' efforts to keep communication channels open and engaged in dialogues.

While the US and China are not actively looking for conflict, the nationalistic rhetoric on both sides means that there is a real danger that any miscalculation or accident could potentially lead to an escalatory spiral and destabilise our region.

The recent balloon incidents seem to suggest that the space or window of opportunity is closing again. This is worrying.

While we are a small nation, we can still play our part. How has Singapore engaged both the US and China on their strategic rivalry? What is the prognosis and are there opportunities for Singapore?

Singapore and US-China Relations

Mr Pritam Singh (Aljunied): Chairman, the Prime Minister's National Day Rally last year outlined perhaps the most pessimistic assessment of US-China relations in recent memory. The Prime Minister was bleak and direct. US-China relations, which set the tone for global affairs, are worsening. Neither side expect relations to improve anytime soon and there is a risk of things worsening quickly.

The Prime Minister noted that more geopolitical contestation was likely in the Asia Pacific and that some countries would choose a side. This assessment was a marked difference in tone compared to the Prime Minister's speech on US-China relations at the 2019 International Institute for Strategic Studies keynote address and the Prime Minister's essay on US-China relations in Foreign Affairs magazine in 2020.

In the aftermath of the recent shoot-down of a Chinese balloon over the US, there were reports of the visit of a senior Pentagon official to Taiwan. Taiwan is likely to be a focus of contention in US-China relations. How does the Ministry assess the Taiwan question? Is it a red line and will it force Singapore to choose a side?

Chairman, it is often said that foreign policy begins at home. In view of the realities of our external environment and the multiracial character of Singapore, it is a reality that our social compact can be susceptible to fissure and cracks because of geopolitical tensions. Beneath the cordial and friendly nature of Singaporeans – the large number of foreigners, our ethnic and racial make-up and the number of new citizens in our economy – can easily be exploited as a fault line. This may make it more difficult for the population to be psychologically prepared for a far more contentious and unpredictable external environment. I have alluded to this prospect at previous Committee of Supply (COS) debates.

The Workers' Party (WP) agrees that Singaporeans should never allow ourselves to be divided – whether by race, religion, income, social differences or place of birth. The reality of a far more complex and diverse Singapore than ever before, can make this feel like a tall order. But it would be important to see ourselves as Singaporeans first, ahead of our ethnic differences, even as the latter categories define who we are culturally.

12.30 pm

We should not shy away from saying that we are Singaporeans first, while recognising and honouring our ethnic and racial realities. This distinction would be critical in building up our psychological readiness for unpredictable US-China relations.

Walking a Tight Rope

Ms Janet Ang (Nominated Member): Mr Chairman, thank you for the privilege to participate in this COS. I would like to declare that I am the Non-Resident Ambassador (NRA) of Singapore to the Holy See.

One year ago, Russia launched a full-scale invasion on the small sovereign state of Ukraine. One year on, the war is still raging. Two years ago, the coup in Myanmar started, and today, the violence is reportedly getting worse. Meanwhile, geopolitical tensions between the US and China have intensified, and Taiwan, which is the red line for China, is constantly being "put to the test". And, alas, if there were any dreams for peace in the Korean Peninsula post Kim-Trump Summit – those, too, have fast faded into the distance. We have experienced supply chain disruptions since the COVID-19 pandemic and these are further exacerbated by the Russia-Ukraine war, especially for food and energy. Inflation is at a 14-year high, and across the globe, we see increasing protectionism.

It is, indeed, troubling times that we live in.

Singapore is a small and young nation in this increasingly divided world where we see sharpened rivalry and deepened mistrust between nations, and even between peoples in the same country. The "Terror on Capitol Hill" is but a vivid reminder of how mistrust, once sowed, can lead to consequences that one cannot imagine could happen. Singaporeans must not think, even for a moment, that these things can never happen to us.

Hence, whether it is our National Service or our multicultural, multi-religious heritage or our shared values of building an inclusive and progressive society for all, Singaporeans must always have the courage to speak and act with integrity for our country. We are a small nation and may, at times, have to walk a tight rope. It is pertinent that Singapore does not falter, but firmly stick to principles and abide by global rules-based multilateral system, whether for international security or for international trade. Singapore may be small, but as Minister Vivian Balakrishnan often reiterated, and I quote, "We cannot be bought, nor can we be bullied."

Our diplomacy approach is simple. We are friendly with everyone. Kudos to our Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) colleagues here and in the overseas Missions for establishing strong diplomatic relationships with many countries. Singapore is not simply a fair-weather friend. I read with pride The Straits Times article on how our Singapore men from the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) responded to a request by Turkey and took part in the rescue operations in Southern Turkey, which was hit by a 7.8 magnitude earthquake on 6 February. This is one of the many heartwarming examples of Singapore diplomacy at its best.

Let me speak next to the US-China relations and implications on business. Both these superpowers are Singapore's key trading partners with China as Singapore's largest trading partner and the US as Singapore's top foreign investor. The US is also Singapore's third largest trading partner and Singapore is China's top foreign investor.

In 2022, we are glad to see the high-level engagements that Singapore leaders had with the US and with China. I would like to ask the Minister for Foreign Affairs to share his perspective on the following questions.

One, with the US-China geopolitics heating up – to the extent of balloons being shot down, how do we ensure that Singapore, being a little red dot, is not caught in their "bullfight"?

Two, in view of recent Presidential-level engagements between them, how hopeful can we be that open communications and dialogue will continue to progress constructively?

Three, how can Singapore build on our strong political and diplomatic engagements with the US and China, as well as with multilateral institutions, to play an effective role as bridge-builder to tackle common challenges, for example, climate change and digital economy?

The Chairman: Your time is up. Please round up now.

Ms Janet Ang: How does Singapore's good relations and strong trade with these two superpowers, keep us in the "green lane" with both of them and enable us to not have to take sides?

The Chairman: Thank you. Dr Lim Wee Kiak.

Singapore-China Relations

Dr Lim Wee Kiak (Sembawang): Chairman, November 2022 was one of the months when we saw two important events taking place and boosted the relationship between Singapore and China. There was the 18th Joint Council of Bilateral Cooperation (JCBC) that was held in Singapore. This meeting was co-chaired by Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister of Economic Policies, Mr Heng Swee Keat and the Vice Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, Mr Han Zheng. A total of 19 Memoranda of Understandings (MOUs) and Agreements were signed with both countries agreeing to continue to work to look for growth opportunities in areas, such as digital and green economies to collaborate in.

Shortly after that, in the same month, Chinese President, Mr Xi Jinping and our Prime Minister, Mr Lee Hsien Loong, met on the sidelines of the 29th Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders' Meeting in Bangkok. Both Leaders affirmed the close and multi-faceted relationships between Singapore and China.

After months of strict lockdowns in China, China has now abandoned its zero COVID-19 policy and reopened its border. The infections have apparently peaked and normalcy has begun to return to major Chinese cities. There are reports of foreign businesses gearing up for travel into China as it reopens its door for foreign travellers again.

Can Minister give us an outlook of the Singapore-China relationship in 2023, especially in the post-pandemic era, given the many areas that both countries are keen to work on together?

The Chairman: Mr Don Wee is not here. Ms Sylvia Lim.

Relationship with Malaysia

Ms Sylvia Lim (Aljunied): Chairman, I note the recent visit to Singapore by the Malaysian Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. The event marks a new chapter in relations across the Singapore Strait, one where our two countries can, perhaps, continue putting down some of the historical baggage accumulated over the years.

I am heartened by the fact that Singapore and Putrajaya are moving ahead on such issues as management of the Flight Information Region (FIR), development of the Rapid Transit System and reducing congestion along the Causeway. There will also be a Leaders' Retreat later this year.

Singapore and Malaysia share many things. The histories of our countries are deeply intertwined, family and social ties link our societies. We are consistently among each other's largest trading partners and Singapore is one of the main sources of foreign direct investment (FDI) into Malaysia – in fact, second largest in 2021.

The Singaporean and Malaysian governments often collaborate on external issues of mutual concern. We do so in several ways – bilaterally, through ASEAN, or as part of groupings, like the Five Power Defence Arrangements and Strait of Malacca Patrols.

Amid the COVID-19 restrictions, Singaporeans discovered how important Malaysian workers are to our economy, just as Malaysian food products are an integral part of our diet. Cultural and social currents often flow both ways across our borders as well.

As neighbours that are geographically right next to each other, there will be differences from time to time. Historically, this included differences over water supply, something that Singapore's diversification of national taps may be helping to alleviate. Then, there are disputes over Pedra Branca, Middle Rocks and South Ledge, which both sides resolved through arbitration at the International Court of Justice. Also appearing as occasional points of disagreement are maritime delimitation, the effects of land reclamation, as well as flight paths for military and civil aircraft. Generally, both sides seek to address differences professionally and respect the arbitral processes in which they agree to participate.

I would like to ask the Foreign Minister how the Government intends to further consolidate and build on the Singapore-Malaysia relationship, and develop new areas for mutually beneficial cooperation at both the official and unofficial levels. We would, of course, bear in mind the potential for political instability in Malaysia.

What are the areas that he seeks to explore, either bilaterally with the Malaysian government, or even unilaterally, beyond those covered during Datuk Seri Anwar's recent visit? Are there any timelines for these proposals or projects? What are the communication channels to prevent the escalation of differences, to ensure calm and professional management and resolution of differences as and when they arise?

Sir, whatever our differences, Malaysia is our closest neighbour. This bilateral relationship is one we must manage effectively in an increasingly contested and uncertain world. I ask the Foreign Minister to lay out the Government's perspective.

Bilateral Ties with Malaysia

Dr Wan Rizal (Jalan Besar): Chairman, Singapore has excellent ties with Malaysia at the federal level. Malaysian Prime Minister Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim recently made an official visit to Singapore in January 2023 where he met both President Halimah and Prime Minister Lee.

Prime Minister Anwar and Prime Minister Lee also witnessed the signing of several Frameworks and MOUs, including Frameworks on Cooperation in Digital Economy and Green Economy, and an MOU on Personal Data Protection, Cybersecurity and Digital Economy. Additionally, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Finance Lawrence Wong's first official visit in his capacity as Deputy Prime Minister was to Malaysia in September 2022.

I would like to ask the Minister, how is MFA engaging Malaysia at the state level and how does the Ministry plan to encourage greater people-to-people links.

Singapore-Brunei Bilateral Relationship

Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim (Chua Chu Kang): Chairman, Singapore and Brunei have long maintained strong relations and, importantly, support for each other.

During the pandemic, Singapore and Brunei had issued a joint Ministerial Statement together with Australia, Canada, Chile, Myanmar and New Zealand affirming commitment to ensuring supply chain connectivity and launched Reciprocal Green Lanes, as well as our first Vaccinated Travel Lanes.

As both countries emerged from the pandemic, our high-level and people-to-people exchanges have steadily resumed.

Last year, Prime Minister Lee and Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong had both visited Brunei, while the Sultan of Brunei and Crown Prince of Brunei have made separate visits to Singapore in August 2022, where they discussed a broad range of areas to further bilateral cooperation in areas, such as in energy and green economy and in youth exchanges.

How have we built on the special Singapore-Brunei bilateral relationship last year, Sultan of Brunei's state visit?

Cooperation with Indonesia

Mr Chong Kee Hiong (Bishan-Toa Payoh): Chairman, Indonesia is one of Singapore's closest neighbours. Singapore and Indonesia are connected through family ties, social and commercial relationships. As one of our most important bilateral partners, we enjoy a high level of cooperation across a wide range of sectors.

Singapore has consistently been Indonesia's top source of FDI since 2014.

According to Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI)'s figures released last year, Indonesia is Singapore's sixth largest trading partner. In June 2022, our Minister for Trade and Industry visited Indonesia to meet with his counterpart among others. Both sides expressed interest in deepening bilateral cooperation in the areas of energy, infrastructure development and the digital economy.

On the bilateral front, Indonesia's ratification of all three agreements, covering FIR, Defence Cooperation and Fugitives Extradition, under the Expanded Framework between Singapore and Indonesia in 2022, was a clear sign of the strength and maturity of our relationship and our commitment to work together as close neighbours.

Would the Minister share with the House an update on how Singapore is stepping up cooperation with Indonesia, especially from the economic perspective?

Relations with Indonesia

Mr Vikram Nair: Chairman, Singapore and Indonesia have had a long-standing and deep relationship tracing back to the late 1960s, following the end of the Konfrontasi. Both were founding members of ASEAN and economic ties between both have been deep. Singapore is the largest foreign investor in Indonesia and both countries are each other's largest source of foreign visitors. The government-to-government and people-to-people ties are strong and close at many levels.

Yet, even between friendly neighbours, there will be differences and matters that need to be resolved. The Prime Ministers of both countries meet regularly and try to address these matters. Last year, Prime Minister Lee and Indonesian Prime Minister Joko Widodo held their Leaders' Retreat in January 2022 in Indonesia, where they witnessed a set of agreements on three long-standing bilateral issues under an Expanded Framework. They were an Agreement on the Realignment of the Boundary between the Jakarta FIR and the Singapore FIR, a Treaty for the Extradition of Fugitives, and a Joint Statement between the Defence Ministers on the 2007 Defence Cooperation Agreement.

These were longstanding matters. We signed the first FIR with Indonesia and the first agreement on military cooperation in 1995. The military agreement was implemented for a few years and then lapsed. The FIR could not be implemented because of external factors. In 2007, agreements were reached on both defence cooperation and extradition, but these were not ratified by Indonesia at the time.

12.45 pm

Each of the points that were agreed upon last year give clarity to matters that are important to both countries and were negotiated as part of a framework to create a good balance of benefits for both sides.

The FIR sets out the agreed boundaries between Singapore and Indonesia in responsibilities for the FIR, with Indonesia delegating responsibility to Singapore for 25 years to provide continuity with what is going on today. There is an option to renew this delegation beyond 25 years, if both parties wish.

The Defence Cooperation Agreement provided for both governments to ratify and implement the 2007 agreement. This provides for cooperation between the armed forces and also permits the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) to continue training in South China Sea Danger Area, where it had been training since the 1960s.

The extradition treaty provides for a complete list of extraditable offences between Singapore and Indonesia and builds on and formalises existing practices, where law enforcement agencies already cooperate with each other.

In January this year, MFA announced that Indonesia had ratified all three treaties. This means that the agreements have received the necessary internal support from the Indonesian legislature.

These are promising developments. I will be grateful if the Minister can give an update on the status of the implementation of these three agreements and whether anything further needs to be done.

Support for Myanmar by ASEAN

Miss Rachel Ong (West Coast): Chairman, the situation in Myanmar remains critical and fragile. The continuing violence in the country remains of deep concern as it also affects neighbouring countries and impacts ASEAN's community-building efforts.

Since the finalisation of ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus in 2021, there has been little progress in its implementation, especially in the area of cessation of violence. This, despite efforts by successive Special Envoys of the ASEAN Chairs, Brunei and Cambodia. As a result, much of the country remains in need of humanitarian assistance.

During the 40th and 41st ASEAN Summits held in November 2022, the leaders called on all parties in Myanmar to facilitate the work of the Secretary-General of ASEAN and ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance in delivering assistance in Myanmar to all in need.

May I ask the Minister for Foreign Affairs what ASEAN is doing with regards to humanitarian assistance and what support has Singapore, as a member of ASEAN, provided and/or will continue to provide?

ASEAN Integration and Engagements

Mr Kwek Hian Chuan Henry (Kebun Baru): Chairman, Sir, ASEAN has come a long way since its establishment in 1967. ASEAN has kept the peace among us and gave us collective heft internationally.

To tap on the promise of ASEAN as a dynamic and diverse growth engine, we have developed a comprehensive agenda to expanded collaboration, tackle challenges and seize new opportunity within ourselves and with like-minded external partners.

Amidst the geopolitical tensions, ASEAN has stood apart as a region committed to economic freedom, growth and free trade and one that upholds the international rule of law. Yet, ASEAN needs more than inspiring ideals and rousing principles to thrive. We must use our collective weight and potential, to encourage key external powers from all over the world to contribute constructively to our growth and stability. In short, ASEAN must be the destination for all and be the backyard of no one.

Can our Minister for Foreign Affairs share how Singapore has worked to develop closer integration within ASEAN, and to help ASEAN engage with our external powers?

Strengthening ASEAN's Credibility

Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song (Aljunied): Sir, the WP supports Singapore's efforts to work with our neighbours to bolster ASEAN.

The regional grouping plays an important role in fostering deeper social, cultural and economic ties, enhancing regional stability and integrating Southeast Asian economies. An effective ASEAN can help countries in the region, including Singapore, to punch above their weight when dealing with major powers.

Despite all its benefits, ASEAN's flaws have been laid bare on several occasions, most recently with the crisis in Myanmar.

A key tenet of ASEAN is the requirement for decision-making to be based on "consultation and consensus", effectively giving any member the veto power over decisions. This requirement can hamper ASEAN's ability to address critical security issues.

How is Singapore working with ASEAN to overcome situations where consensus is hindered by a minority of member states?

According to Article 20 of the ASEAN Charter, "where a consensus cannot be achieved, the ASEAN Summit may decide how a specific decision can be made". Has there ever been any push by Singapore at the ASEAN Summit for a decision to be taken by majority vote on issues, where arriving at a consensus is impossible?

Has Singapore asked ASEAN to adopt stronger mechanisms to enforce its own consensus decisions?

For example, little progress has been achieved by the Myanmar Armed Forces in the implementation of ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus to put Myanmar back on the path to peace following the military coup.

Does the ASEAN Summit have the authority to decide by a vote to suspend Myanmar from participation in all ASEAN meetings and initiatives? This will send a strong signal to the country's military rulers that their violent actions against their own citizens are not compatible with ASEAN's principles.

US Engagement of ASEAN

Mr Gan Thiam Poh (Ang Mo Kio): Thank you, Chairman. Last November, the US and ASEAN established a comprehensive strategic partnership at the 10th ASEAN-US Summit in Cambodia. This new agreement will facilitate closer collaborations in a wide range of areas, including climate change, energy research, transportation and health, just to name a few. Will the Ministry provide an update on US engagement of ASEAN?

ASEAN Plus Three

ASEAN has been boosting its engagement with more countries over the years, including through the extra-regional platform of ASEAN Plus Three (APT), which comprises 10 ASEAN member states, the People's Republic of China, Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK).

Today, APT is the main platform to promote East Asian Cooperation, including political security, trade and investment, finance, energy and many, many more areas.

In view of the rising tensions between the US and China, what are the main challenges facing APT, and how can APT advance to protect and promote the interests of East Asia? Is the APT on track with the implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025? Would the Ministry share recent APT initiatives and their outcomes?

ASEAN and Pacific Islands

Singapore enjoys good engagement with the Pacific Islands. We have hosted the Pacific Islands FinTech Innovation Challenge in July 2022, which aimed to foster stronger collaboration between ASEAN and the Pacific Islands in digitalisation.

Will the Ministry share with us which are the areas of cooperation ASEAN and Pacific Islands seek to advance in the near future?

Relations with India Post-pandemic

Mr Murali Pillai (Bukit Batok): Sir, in a Straits Times article dated 21 December 2022, entitled "India set to become world's fastest-growing economy on post-COVID spending boom", it was reported that India is expected to grow 6% in this fiscal year ending 31 March 2024.

Given this blistering pace of growth, it is imperative that Singapore does more to engage our giant Asian neighbour for mutual benefit, not just between the countries but also ASEAN.

I was happy to note an initiative that Prime Minister Mr Narendra Modi from India suggested in 2018 when he visited Singapore was made reality on 21 February 2023, when Prime Minister Lee and Prime Minister Modi both launched the PayNow-Unified Payments Interface (UPI) Linkage that will allow for cheaper, faster and safer cross-border retail payments and remittances for businesses and individuals. This is indicative of a strong partnership between Singapore and India.

I would like to ask the hon Minister for his assessment of Singapore's relations with India, and what we are doing to deepen India's engagement here and in the region.

Engagements with Emerging Markets

Mr Gan Thiam Poh: Chairman, last June, Prime Minister Lee made his first official visit to Africa when he visited Rwanda. I understand that he had announced a three-year Singapore-Africa Partnership Package. We have also kept up ties with South Asia. Several Ministers visited the region last year, including Deputy Prime Minister Wong, who also made an official visit to India in September. What are the plans to step up engagements with emerging markets this year?

Latin America

Ms Joan Pereira (Tanjong Pagar): Chairman, last month, at the 16th Pacific Alliance (PA) Summit in Colombia, Minister for Trade and Industry, Mr Gan Kim Yong, signed the PA-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (PASFTA) and PA-Singapore Joint Declaration with his counterparts from the PA member states – namely, Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru.

In July last year, we substantively concluded negotiations with the other Latin America economic bloc, the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), which comprises Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay.

Will the Ministry elaborate how these agreements will benefit and help build trade between Singapore and Latin America? Will the Ministry also share with the House an update on our other initiatives to engage with Latin America?

Bilateral Relationship with UK and EU

Mr Gan Thiam Poh: Chairman, the UK Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, Mr James Cleverly, and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, signed a MOU on the Singapore-UK Third Country Training Programme (TCTP) last September. The MOU aims to jointly promote capacity building in ASEAN and the region.

The European Union (EU) countries like Germany are also keen for more cooperation. The Federal Chancellor of Germany made an official visit to Singapore last November, which concluded with the signing of the Germany-Singapore Framework for Sustainability and Innovation which aims to increase economic partnership.

Singapore-Middle East Relations

Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim: Sir, the Middle East/Gulf countries are an important region for Singapore – not only in terms of trade but also because they are Islamic countries. So, what happens there is also important to us.

In September 2022, the Minister for Foreign Affairs made an official visit to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as both countries commemorate the 45th anniversary of diplomatic relations.

During the visit, Minister has also met the Secretary-General of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC), His Excellency Dr Nayef Al-Hajraf. Both sides noted the strong foundation for cooperation set in place by the GCC-Singapore Free Trade Agreement, which entered into force in 2013 and encouraged greater exchanges between the GCC and Singapore, as well as with ASEAN in areas of mutual interest, like food security and education. How is Singapore looking to build on our growing ties with the Gulf countries?

Recently, the Middle East has seen a positive spotlight with Qatar hosting a successful Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup finals. There is, thus, opportunity to bring closer people-to-people ties. In this regard, besides such close cooperation with the Gulf countries, what other role can Singapore play in assisting to alleviate the Palestinian-Israeli tensions in the Middle East, whether on our own or together with other Gulf countries?

Globalisation and Multilateralism

Mr Liang Eng Hwa (Bukit Panjang): Sir, the geopolitical stability that we have experienced for decades which has helped propelled globalisation is now being challenged. The rivalry and intensification of competition between major powers and the Ukraine war has altered the global geopolitical landscape.

We are increasingly seeing countries taking unilateral actions to decouple in areas of trade, technology, investments and finance. More countries are taking steps to shore up their economic security through policies to safeguard strategically important technologies and data.

This development would create more barriers for businesses to internationalise, with a likely negative impact on global economic growth. Can I ask the Minister for his view on how he see globalisation panning out in the years ahead?

Sir, Singapore participated in several multinational platforms like World Trade Organization (WTO), World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations (UN). We play our part, working with these agencies to deal major crisis and help resolve deep-seated global issues.

Can I ask the Minister if these multilateral organisations have been able to galvanise actions and make real impact? Is multilateralism still useful for Singapore when globalisation is under threat and what role should Singapore play?

Mr Kwek Hian Chuan Henry: Chairman, Sir, the international situation is in flux. One, the war in Ukraine is undermining the international system that kept the peace and defended countries' independence. Two, strained US-China relations have made armed conflict more likely and split up technology, finance and supply chains. Three, the combination of geopolitical clashes, the formation of regional trading groups and the ageing of populations in developed countries have caused inflation and slowed down economic growth. Four, the climate emergency is worsening the differences between countries, leading to greater worldwide inequality.

Fortunately, change brings opportunities for those who are bold and fast-moving. For example, advancing technology is enabling Singapore to do business with more people further away. Furthermore, Singapore is at the heart of ASEAN – a large, varied, rapidly growing and youthful region.

1.00 pm

Can our Minister for Foreign Affairs explain how we can adjust our foreign policy to ensure that Singapore succeeds in this shifting world. How can our Foreign Service help us in this?

Consular Services

Mr Desmond Choo (Tampines): As Singapore and the rest of the world step down on COVID-19 restrictions, travel is picking up globally. Many Singaporeans are resuming their overseas travel. Singaporeans have always been well-travelled and "revenge travelling" is expected to fuel even more expected trips for some Singaporeans. It is common to hear people saying that they need to make up for lost time. Some Singaporeans have also taken this time to resume their overseas postings and business travels.

MFA had faced significant request to consular assistance during the pandemic. With the DORSCON Green, we should now thank our MFA officers for their three years of difficult work. How has the volume and complexity of consular services changed since easing of COVID-19 and the resumption of travel by Singaporeans? With the significant increase in outbound travel over the last few months, what advice would MFA provide to Singaporean travellers?

Could the Ministry also provide us with an update on some of its efforts to improve the delivery of consular assistance to Singaporeans overseas? What were the valuable lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic to incorporate in our consular services and development of overseas missions? What are the challenges that MFA faced that will require the public's support?

The easing of COVID-19 restrictions also coincided with the Russian-Ukraine conflict and the Turkish-Syrian earthquake. Can the Ministry provide an update on how they supported Singaporeans affected by these disasters?

Helping Singaporeans during Pandemic

Mr Liang Eng Hwa: Sir, our Embassies, High Commissions, Consulars, Trade Office and Overseas Missions are like a home away from home for Singaporeans overseas. They are like a one-stop service for Singaporeans in need or in a dire situation, or for seeking information and queries. These were well demonstrated during the numerous emergency situations in foreign lands and, more recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

When Wuhan city was dramatically locked down in January 2020, MFA and our embassy in Beijing were in touch with stranded Singaporeans there and worked on their expeditious evacuation. Similarly, when Shanghai went into lockdown mode in April 2022, our Consulate-General office in Shanghai sent food packs to Singaporeans who were unable to obtain food on their own. They also helped source for essential supplies and medications, and facilitated Singaporeans who wished to return home urgently.

This is the service ethos of our MFA officers in Singapore and overseas. We owe them a debt of gratitude for going all out to take care of Singaporeans overseas, often going beyond their call of duty and at personal risk, and leaving no one behind in any emergency situation.

Now that COVID-19 is in our rearview mirror, it is important that Singaporeans know about the extraordinary work that our MFA officers did during the pandemic, to help Singaporeans overseas and at home. This would be also useful as the Government undertake the after action review (AAR) and to look at areas that we can further improve or strengthen.

Hence, I would like to request the Minister to share with the House and Singaporeans more details of how MFA supported Singaporeans overseas affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Singaporeans Travelling Overseas

Mr Cheng Hsing Yao (Nominated Member): Sir, we are entering into a post-COVID-19 world with travel restrictions easing and borders reopening. There is a strong pent-up demand for travel and Singaporeans are once more beginning to travel in large numbers across the globe.

Given that it has been two to three years since people have travelled, many Singaporeans have forgotten some of the precautions and preparations needed when travelling overseas. For example, there have been stories of Singaporeans forgetting to apply for travel insurance, falling ill overseas and racking up thousands of dollars in medical expenses. Other Singaporeans have lost their passports or had been the victims of theft. Moving forward, we can expect more Singaporeans to invariably encounter problems.

With the easing of travel restrictions worldwide, what can Singaporeans do to better prepare themselves for their overseas trips and does MFA reach out to Singaporeans to share with them travel tips?

Miss Cheryl Chan Wei Ling (East Coast): Chairman, as a small city-state, Singapore has thrived through many years of mutual exchange with many countries. We celebrated the 30th anniversary of the Singapore Cooperation Program (SCP) in 2022. Close to 150,000 foreign officials have participated in SCP courses, and a large proportion of participants were from ASEAN member states.

Given the global fight against climate change and the impact of digitalisation in dealing with real world issues, there is increasing need for countries to cooperate and develop framework, conduct practices and co-create technical solutions that are beneficial for both their domestic needs and concurrently helping to solve global issues.

While the commitment from countries is strong in wanting to reduce global emissions under the Paris Agreement, there needs to be demonstrated political will to set up intersectoral climate governance on critical areas like renewable energy transition, food security, forest and land use protection amongst others. I note that MFA has launched the Sustainability Action Package (SAP) to support the capacity-building needs of developing countries on sustainability and climate change.

Moving forward, I would like to ask the Minister how is the SCP evolving to better meet regional and global challenges? Will the SCP be advocating for an overarching coordinating body on climate change to ensure more information-sharing across ASEAN bodies, one that can convene dialogue partners to exchange, based on structural needs and solutions and also engage civil societies; something similar to the public health emergencies model established during the pandemic?

Engaging Singaporeans on Foreign Policy

Mr Gerald Giam Yeap Song: Of all the Ministries, MFA's work is probably the most esoteric to many Singaporeans. Some think that foreign policy is too complicated, that it is not as relevant to their daily lives as many domestic issues or that it is too sensitive to have open discussions about. As a result, foreign policy is often left out from public discussions. This is not healthy in a nation as educated and with as much access to information from around the world as Singaporeans are.

In a speech in July 2017, the Foreign Minister stated that "our diplomacy is only credible, if we are able to maintain a domestic consensus on Singapore's core interests and our foreign policy priorities." If there is insufficient engagement with Singaporeans on foreign policy, it will be close to impossible to build and maintain that "domestic consensus", especially in the face of a plethora of news and information from abroad, including disinformation.

How is MFA engaging Singaporeans on foreign policy matters and explaining our core interests to citizens of all ages and education levels? Do our missions engage overseas Singaporeans on foreign policy?

How is the Ministry countering some of the narratives put out by foreign actors that attempt to influence Singaporeans' views on policies that may go against our national interest?

During the debate on the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Bill in 2021, Minister K. Shanmugam acknowledged that a whole-of-society effort is required for public education and that he "welcome(s) everyone's assistance in helping to engage and educate the population."

How is MFA facilitating this? Is the Ministry working with schools, academic institutions, non-government organisations (NGOs) and business chambers here and abroad to engage, inform and involve them in Singapore's foreign policy?

Women in Diplomacy

Ms He Ting Ru (Sengkang): Mr Chairman, the emphasis on families and equality in this year's Budget makes it a good time to discuss the role of women in diplomacy.

Apart from just looking at the proportion of women in roles across our foreign service, I would also like to understand what more is being done to support women and their families in the foreign service as they move ahead with their careers.

International Women's Day is coming up next week. Yet, I note that unlike many countries in the region, such as Australia, the Philippines and Indonesia, we still have not yet had a woman take on the role of Minister for Foreign Affairs.

Women in key leadership positions create role models for those who wish to follow in their footsteps. Studies have also found that having women involved in a peace process increases the chances of a negotiation being reached.

Getting to those roles, however, may not be easy. The foreign service can be a tough job – being on call, constant travel, frequent relocation and a high stress working environment. This can make having a stable family life particularly difficult.

These pressures may fall particularly heavily on women who seek a long-term career in our foreign service. We still live in societies where there are greater expectations on women to be carers and to, perhaps, even forego their career prospects to fulfil these obligations.

I would like to ask what steps the Ministry is taking to support women in our foreign service, especially to ensure that they have an equal chance of success. What is being done to regularly review the circumstances faced by women in the foreign service and their families, and improve on existing measures? How much of the approximately \$10 million earmarked for "Manpower Development" in MFA's FY2023 Budget is allocated to equality efforts?

Striving for our Singaporean aspirations of equality in the foreign service sets a tone for society – that gender equality is of importance across all areas.

Funding for UNHCR

Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang (Nee Soon): Sir, through my visits to Rohingya refugee camps, I have seen firsthand the amazing work that United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) does in helping the most vulnerable, defenseless and voiceless people.

UNHCR serves millions of refugees. They need money to help them, but the UNHCR was about \$4 billion, or 44% short of the budget that it needs to carry out its work.

In 2021, Singapore ranked 103rd on a list of 125 donors to the UNHCR. Contributions that ranked ahead of Singapore included countries with a far lower per capita gross domestic product (GDP).

I previously asked that we increase our contributions. The Government responded that we are a small country with limited resources. I understand that and I also appreciate that our contribution is comparable to that of other ASEAN countries.

It has been six years since we increased our contributions by \$10,000, to US\$60,000 annually now. Can we do our part by considering increasing our contributions to the UNHCR further?

Support for Refugees

Almost every month, I join volunteers in Nee Soon East and Darul Makmur mosque to teach students at a refugee school. We talk to the children about their ambition. I struggle because I know their dreams are almost impossible because they are refugees with very little hope of getting citizenship.

Amazingly, without formal education, four of them have completed their GSCE "O" Levels and are now pursuing a university degree and citizenship under the Philippines' Complementary Pathways programme. I met with two of them, Rehana and Saber, who just started their degree in accountancy and I finally saw hope in their eyes. They have been refugees their whole lives.

In Singapore, we say education is a great equaliser and we tell our children that if you study and work hard, you have a chance of succeeding. But this is not possible for many refugee children around the world. I understand that Singapore faces difficulties in accepting refugees because of our small land size and I am not asking for that.

We had around 1,700 international students on scholarship in 2019. Can the Government consider following the Philippines and extending scholarships to a limited number of refugees?

Non-Resident Ambassadors

Mr Raj Joshua Thomas (Nominated Member): Chairman, Non-Resident Ambassadors (NRAs) are a unique part of Singapore's diplomacy. The scheme widens the MFA's reach beyond countries in which we have a permanent mission and helps to build personal diplomatic relations with a larger number of countries.

I would like to ask the Minister: how does the Ministry track the performance of NRAs and the effectiveness of their representation, and the frequency of such assessments. Further, could I also enquire on the resources that are made available to enable them to carry out their duties?

I have also noticed that most of the NRAs have private emails, some even Gmail accounts listed on the Singapore Government directory online and on MFA's website. I would like to enquire whether NRAs are given official MFA email addresses and whether it is prudent to allow them to use private email addresses in correspondence with foreign officials?

Finally, I would like to ask whether the Ministry has any plans to increase the number of NRA representations and to which regions or countries?

The Chairman: Minister Vivian Balakrishnan.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs (Dr Vivian Balakrishnan): Mr Chairman, 2022 was a very busy year. We handled close to 200 incoming and outgoing visits. We expect a higher tempo in the year ahead, especially with more countries reopening their borders. The demand for consular services will intensify as more Singaporeans travel overseas and sometimes get into trouble.

But more critically, the world has become much more complex, with a perfect storm of multiple interlocking crises in the military, security, economic, public health, climate, technological and sociopolitical domains. The global order, which has served us so well for six decades, is under severe strain.

Mr Henry Kwek asked how our foreign policy should adapt to these evolving trends. Let me highlight four points.

First, foreign policy begins at home. I think the Leader of Opposition also agrees with that. If we are not united and successful as a thriving, vital city-state in the heart of Southeast Asia, we will quickly become irrelevant to the world. I am also gratified that if you listen to all the speeches by the People's Action Party (PAP) Members of Parliament, the Opposition and the Nominated Members of Parliament; in fact, if you all exchanged your speeches, it would not have been noticeable. This speaks well to the consensus on foreign policy in Singapore.

Second point, our foreign policy must be based on a clear-eyed understanding of Singapore's long-term national interests and our vulnerabilities in a volatile and dangerous world. We refuse to be a vassal state that can be bullied or bought. We will not be a proxy or a stalking horse for any superpower. We will uphold principles, but we will not choose sides.

For instance, our principled position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine – which, in fact, has just marked its first grim anniversary – illustrates this point. We defend the right of all nations, big or small, to have their sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity fully respected.

Third, we must continue to make common cause with as many countries as possible by building overlapping circles of friends. The innermost circle, obviously, consists of our immediate neighbours and ASEAN.

Fourth point, we must always, always uphold international law and rules-based multilateralism and the avenues for peaceful resolution of disputes – precisely because we are a tiny city-state.

Let me now deal with the questions on the US-China competition. I believe Mr Vikram Nair, Ms Tin Pei Ling, Ms Janet Ang and the Leader of the Opposition have asked about the impact of the difficult and complicated US-China relationship on our region and on Singapore.

This represents, in fact, a fundamental deficit of strategic trust, rooted in incompatible worldviews and aggravated by their respective domestic political pressures. Both sides wish to avoid conflict, but neither side can afford to be seen as weak.

The "balloon incident" reflected this dynamic. It exacerbated suspicions and tensions amidst strong domestic reactions on both sides. The incident was a setback to the interactions between the US and China. But I am glad that Secretary of State Antony Blinken and State Councilor Wang Yi did meet in Munich earlier this month. It shows that both sides recognise the necessity for dialogue and diplomacy, especially at times like these.

Effective communication between the US and China is vital to manage risks in global affairs. Both sides need to establish guardrails, as hardened, negative views against the "other side" increasingly become structural features of geopolitical discourse, in both the US and China.

For example, there is a growing body of opinion within China that the US is a superpower in terminal decline, which is determined to contain China's rise at all costs. In the US, there has also been a deep shift in attitudes towards China. The US believes that China "is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military and technological power to advance that objective". It is now a settled bipartisan US view that China's rising power is inimical to American interests and values.

Both sides are now locked in an intense and sharpening strategic competition across multiple domains. The US has identified computing-related technologies, biotech and clean tech as force multipliers throughout the technological ecosystem and emphasised leadership in each of these arenas as a national security imperative. Consequently, the US has decided that it needs to maintain as large a lead as possible over China in these fields. To this end, the US is implementing systematic measures, including export restrictions on advanced semi-conductor technology. There are, in fact, ongoing discussions on an outbound investment screening mechanism.

On its part, China is determined to achieve greater self-reliance and to prevent itself from being held to ransom. It is progressively onshoring segments of its supply chains in the tech sector. Collectively, these moves by both sides, increase the danger of a grand bifurcation in technological and economic systems, a deepening of tensions and an elevation of mutual suspicions. These have profound implications for the rest of the world.

There is a real risk that the steps taken by the US and China to reduce their mutual interdependence will adversely affect the global economy. Singapore will not escape such spill-over consequences. Our open economy is highly dependent on doing business with the entire world and we have benefited greatly from being a vital node in globalised supply chains. The US is the largest foreign investor in Singapore and our top trading partner for services. But we are also one of the largest investors in China, which is our top trading partner in goods. If the US and China get along, then Singapore will be ideally positioned to prosper. On the other hand, if things go wrong between them, these strengths can quickly turn into vulnerabilities for Singapore.

The Taiwan Strait has become a more dangerous flashpoint. For China, Taiwan is a part of China and Taiwanese independence is an absolute red line.

However, to the US and some other western countries, Taiwan is a vibrant democracy that they need to protect, just like Ukraine, which in fact, is different, because Ukraine is an independent country and a member of the UN.

Meanwhile in Taiwan, more and more people are identifying themselves as exclusively Taiwanese. Whilst neither the US nor China seek a military conflict over Taiwan, missteps or mishaps can easily trigger a cycle of "tit-for-tat" actions and reactions that spiral dangerously out of control. A conflict over Taiwan will have global repercussions and a much more direct impact on Singapore than the ongoing war in Ukraine. Not only is Taiwan much nearer to us geographically, but our ties with the US, with China and Taiwan are much stronger and deeper, compared to our ties with Russia and Ukraine.

We have repeatedly stressed to both the US and China that Singapore and indeed, the countries in our region want to maintain good relations with both countries. We do not wish to be forced to choose sides. We participate in multiple initiatives that have overlapping memberships, but do not always include both parties, for instance, whether you talk about the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, or the Global Development Initiative.

We have always put Singapore's national interest first and we take principled positions impartially, even if it does not always please one or the other superpower. We need the quiet confidence and the national unity to do so consistently, for the long term.

Given the grave implications for the world, we, like most countries, hope that the US and China work out a modus vivendi between themselves. Senior Minister of State Sim Ann will elaborate on our cooperation with both the US and China later.

Let me now turn to our immediate neighbours: Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei. We continue to strengthen our relations with all three countries.

Mr Vikram Nair asked about the significance of the Expanded Framework agreements with Indonesia. It is noteworthy that Singapore and Indonesia recently completed our respective domestic legal processes for the ratification of the three agreements under the Expanded Framework, namely the FIR Agreement, the Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA), and the Extradition Treaty (ET).

For the FIR Agreement, the next step is for Singapore and Indonesia to jointly seek approval from the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). Once the FIR Agreement is ready for implementation, both sides will arrange for all three agreements to enter into force simultaneously, on a mutually agreed date.

These three agreements will bring tangible benefits to both our countries. Under the FIR Agreement, Indonesia will delegate to Singapore the provision of air navigation services in portions of the airspace, which are within the re-aligned Jakarta FIR, which are nearest to Singapore. This will ensure that the present and future air traffic to Changi Airport and nearby Indonesian airports continue to be managed safely and efficiently.

The DCA will enhance cooperation and interaction between our two military forces. It will provide clarity for the SAF's training in Indonesian archipelagic and territorial waters and airspace, on a basis that fully respects Indonesia's sovereignty over its territory, while preserving Singapore's rights under United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Finally, the ET will strengthen cooperation between our law enforcement agencies to combat crime and to complement our existing cooperation with Indonesia. Taken together, the resolution of these three long-standing issues paves the way for us to advance our bilateral cooperation significantly in the years ahead.

We look forward to welcoming President Joko Widodo to Singapore soon for the next Singapore-Indonesia Leaders' Retreat. This will be a good opportunity for our leaders to build on the strong progress in the bilateral relationship.

Mr Don Wee and Ms Sylvia Lim asked about our relations with Malaysia. Our close relations with Malaysia are underpinned by strong people-to-people ties and frequent high-level exchanges. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim became Malaysia's 10th Prime Minister after their 15th General Election. Prime Minister Anwar is an old friend of Singapore. Many Singaporean Ministers have known our Malaysian counterparts for decades, and we have kept in regular contact. At the end of January, we welcomed Prime Minister Anwar on his introductory visit to Singapore. His delegation included four Ministers, the Sarawak Premier and the Johor Menteri Besar.

It was a fruitful visit. We signed three government-to-government MOUs: the Framework Agreements on Digital and Green Economy, as well as the MOU on Personal Data Protection, Cybersecurity and Digital Economy. These signal our commitment to work on new and emerging areas of mutual interest.

We look forward to welcoming Prime Minister Anwar back in Singapore later this year for the 10th Leaders' Retreat. Meanwhile, we also have significant ongoing cooperation projects, including the Rapid Transit System (RTS) Link between Singapore and Johor Bahru. This project will facilitate more convenient two-way travel for the tens of thousands who cross the border every day. It is making good progress and is expected to commence operations by the end of 2026.

However, as with any friendship, problems will, from time to time, arise. For example, while the issue of sovereignty over Pedra Branca has been conclusively settled, Malaysia has raised objections to Singapore's development works at Pedra Branca. These works are needed to enhance maritime safety and security, and to improve search and rescue capabilities in the area. They also ensure that Pedra Branca is adequately protected against the threat of sea-level rise.

Let me assure you that these development works are fully in accordance with international law and Singapore's sovereignty over the island and its waters.

Nevertheless, in the spirit of mutual cooperation and good faith, we temporarily suspended the works in May 2022, to facilitate discussions on Malaysia's concerns and to comprehensively address Malaysia's queries.

In December 2022, Singapore put forward proposals to Malaysia to resolve the issue and move forward with the works. Subsequently, we agreed to Malaysia's request for more time for them to consider our clarifications and proposals. Presently, the development works remain paused due to the monsoon season. We will manage our differences constructively and pragmatically, and not allow any single issue to

overshadow the entire relationship.

1.30 pm

With Brunei, our unique, long-standing, special relationship remains strong and mutually beneficial. We continue to sustain a good momentum of bilateral exchanges. Last year, we were honoured to welcome His Majesty Sultan Bolkiah on his fifth state visit to Singapore and His Royal Highness Crown Prince Billah for the eighth Singapore-Brunei Young Leaders' Programme. Prime Minister attended His Majesty's 76th birthday celebration in July 2022 and Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong visited Brunei at the start of this year. Deputy Prime Minister called on the Sultan and the Crown Prince, and had productive meetings with many Bruneian Ministers. We look forward to working with Brunei to expand our cooperation in emerging areas, such as the green economy, agritech and energy. Second Minister Maliki Osman will elaborate further on these areas of cooperation subsequently.

Mr Gan Thiam Poh asked about our efforts to deepen cooperation between ASEAN and the US, as well as our regional neighbours. Singapore has always advocated engaging major players so that they all have a stake in the peace, stability and development of our region, and can create a stable balance of power in the Asia Pacific. This provides small countries, like Singapore, more room for manoeuvre than if there was only a single power dominating our region. Naturally, we do not want the major powers to make Asia their battleground or conduct proxy wars here. Instead, we want them to be engaged constructively – politically and economically – so as to enhance regional cooperation, development and security. This will benefit all countries, big and small, in our region.

This is why Singapore seeks to forge overlapping circles of friends as embodied in the open, inclusive and ASEAN-centred regional architecture. ASEAN-led mechanisms like the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Plus Three, and the Plus-One summits bring major powers including the US, China, Russia, India, Japan, the EU and Australia to the same table convened by ASEAN. Our external partners also want to do more with ASEAN. Last year, ASEAN upgraded its relations with the US and India to Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships, after doing the same with China and Australia the year before. ASEAN also signed the Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement with the EU in October 2022. We, therefore, welcome the interest of major powers to take clear stakes in our region and in our prosperity, and to engage ASEAN on our own merits.

For this to work, ASEAN must remain united, coherent and credible. Mr Gerald Giam asked if we are looking at alternative options for decision making, when consensus is difficult or hindered. The need for consensus is, in fact, a design feature, it is not a bug, precisely because of the great diversity within ASEAN. No other regional association has the level of diversity that ASEAN represents. Nevertheless, the ASEAN Charter does provide for decision-making at the Leaders' level, even if there are profound political problems in a member state. For example, we have not allowed the coup in Myanmar to paralyse ASEAN or to hold the rest of us hostage.

As ASEAN Chair this year, Indonesia has an ambitious agenda to step up ASEAN integration in key areas, including the green economy and digital sphere. In particular, the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement promotes our economic integration and growth. Singapore has also committed to assisting Timor-Leste in its accession to ASEAN membership, which is to be achieved through an objective, criteria-based roadmap. We urge other ASEAN member states and our external partners to similarly support Timor-Leste. Singapore will also work closely with and support Indonesia in fulfilling its priorities as Chair this year.

Mr Seah Kian Peng asked about the outlook in Myanmar and ASEAN's role in it. Two years after the coup in Myanmar, the situation remains grave and grim. Singapore and ASEAN remain deeply disappointed with the lack of progress in the implementation of the Five-Point Consensus. We will not interfere with domestic politics in Myanmar, but the solution must ultimately involve national reconciliation amongst all the domestic stakeholders living there. This will not be easy to achieve.

Mr Liang Eng Hwa asked about the continued relevance of multilateralism. As a small state, the observance of international law is vital for our sovereignty and independence. But the fact remains, we live in an increasingly fragmented world, with the erosion of shared rules for the global commons and where more frequent resort to unilateral action. It is, therefore, even more important for Singapore to strongly advocate adherence to international law and to actively contribute to shaping global norms.

Mr Alex Yam asked about the implications of the war in Ukraine. Let me state for the record: Russia's invasion is a clear and egregious violation of international law and the UN Charter. The UN Charter enshrines the core principles of peaceful settlement of disputes, the non-use of force and non-interference in a country's internal affairs. Russia's invasion sets a very dangerous precedent that jeopardises the security and existence of small states, and especially small states like us.

There are many other global challenges such as food security, emerging diseases and threats in the cyberspace that require collective action. The most salient and urgent is climate change, and Singapore is particularly sensitive to this as an alternative energy-disadvantaged and low-lying island state.

Singapore must continue advocating for multilateralism and globalisation, and support for the UN. We do our part to contribute to the multilateral governance of the global commons. We are helping to develop fair, inclusive and well-functioning global carbon markets. Singapore has been co-facilitating Article 6 negotiations on developing carbon markets at the Conference of Parties (COP) of the United Nations Framework Climate Change (UNFCCC) and concluded carbon market collaboration agreements with Ghana, Peru and Papua New Guinea at COP27 last year.

We also have a significant role in developing international oceans law, as well as new global norms in cyberspace and in outer space. Ambassador Rena Lee serves as President of the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Intergovernmental Conference, which aims to enhance the sustainable use of our maritime global commons. Singapore, represented by our Permanent Representative to the

UN, Mr Burhan Gafoor, chairs the UN Open-ended Working Group on security of and in the use of information and communications technologies, to build a safe and secure cyberspace for all.

Singaporeans are also taking the lead in other international organisations. For example, Mr Daren Tang serves as Director General of the World Intellectual Property Organization – this is the first time a Singaporean has led a UN agency, while Raja Kumar serves as the President of the Financial Action Task Force – he also happens to be the first Singaporean to have assumed this role.

Strategic and geopolitical tensions are also undermining the multilateral trading system. Singapore depends on a stable, functioning and free international trading system to make a living, centred around a common set of rules for all. Remember, our trade volume is three times our GDP. So, we do need to continue to uphold such a system as embodied and represented by the WTO. We also diversify our trade relationships through regional arrangements such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) – that is ASEAN-10, plus China, Australia, New Zealand, ROK and Japan. We have also substantially completed the negotiations for the Mercosur-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (FTA), and we have also signed on to the Pacific Alliance-Singapore FTA. Mind you, all these have been signed during the last couple of years when there was a pushback against globalisation, against free trade and in fact, the world being disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. But we have been able to double down on the cause of free trade.

We will need to continue to seize opportunities in global integration and also seize opportunities in emerging areas like the digital economy and sustainability. We have concluded Digital Economy Agreements (DEAs) with several like-minded partners. For instance, we have signed the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA) with Chile and New Zealand, and in fact, right now, this agreement with only three small countries – Chile, New Zealand and Singapore – we are now reviewing accession requests from the ROK, China, Canada and Costa Rica.

We signed the landmark Singapore-Australia Green Economy Agreement in October 2022, the first-of-its-kind agreement that will facilitate trade and investment in environmentally sustainable goods and services, and such collaborations are crucial as we work towards keeping Singapore sustainable and economically vibrant.

Let me conclude. We are entering a period of intense superpower rivalry, global economic disruption and looming climate change, and all these within a more fragmented, turbulent world. It is worth recalling the words of Mr Lee Kuan Yew: "We have to live with the world as it is, not as we wish it should be." Singapore and Singaporeans must approach all these challenges with a combination of realism and quiet confidence. Do not underestimate the external dangers, but neither be overwhelmed by them.

We do have significant strengths. We are one of the few countries whose unity has, in fact, strengthened after the pandemic. That is why there is strong interest from businesses, investors and entrepreneurs from elsewhere, queueing up to come to Singapore and to plug into our ecosystem. They recognise and appreciate the stability and consistency with which we have run our affairs, both internally and externally. This reputation for consistency and stability, and high levels of public trust and unity provides us with the strength and the resilience to manage our foreign policy challenges in a very hazardous world.

The Chairman: Second Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Mohamad Maliki Osman.

The Second Minister for Foreign Affairs (Dr Mohamad Maliki Bin Osman): Mr Chairman, Mr Don Wee, Dr Wan Rizal and Ms Sylvia Lim asked about our relations with Malaysia. Malaysia and Singapore are deeply intertwined, with strong people-to-people, cultural and economic linkages. There is a high tempo of two-way exchanges and visits. Since the start of the year, there have been more than 10 high-level visits, including by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. President Halimah will make a state visit to Malaysia next month.

We also devote considerable resources to deepening our links with the various Malaysian states. Apart from the visit by Johor Menteri Besar Onn Hafiz Ghazi earlier this month, we also hosted delegations from Terengganu, Selangor and Sarawak.

I will be visiting Terengganu and Kelantan in April – to explore opportunities to work together for mutual benefit. Ultimately, the relationship between Singapore and Malaysia is undergirded by enduring people-to-people linkages, which we are committed to strengthening into the next generation. Mr Chairman, please allow me to speak briefly in Malay.

(In Malay): [Please refer to [Vernacular Speech](#) on Pg 239.] As a small nation without natural resources, our foreign policy is to strengthen our relations with as many nations and to stay relevant in a rapidly changing world. At the same time, we have to be united and concur that our foreign policy begins at home. Every citizen plays a role towards advancing Singapore's interests in the international arena.

Singapore's foreign policy will always be based on our principles and interests. Every choice and decision we make prioritises Singapore's interests. We are confronting a period of intense superpower competition and a more fragmented and turbulent world. But Singapore approaches these challenges from a position of strength. Our political and economic stability, as well as our consistency in managing our affairs, are valued by others around the world. At the same time, our unity and public trust are crucial to navigating foreign policy challenges. In this regard, Singaporeans trust their Government and remain more united than ever before. I urge Singaporeans to be more aware of our external environment, so that they know the realities of the world we live in, but also have the hope and confidence that, if we stay united, we can emerge from these challenges stronger.

Therefore, we should continue to endeavour to strengthen relations with our neighbours, especially our most immediate neighbours. Let me start with Malaysia. As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said during Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's visit to Singapore in January, Singapore and Malaysia share a relationship quite unlike any other. A key pillar in our relations is the deep familial ties, as well as our

shared history, languages and cultures. Singaporeans and Malaysians frequently visit each other's countries, whether for work, play or visiting relatives.

However, we cannot take the current strength of our people-to-people relationship for granted. We must ensure our younger generation are invested in it. We must create opportunities for young Singaporeans and Malaysians to engage one another, and spend time together to learn about and appreciate one another's perspectives and aspirations. Our education system plays an important role in this, especially now with the easing of COVID-19-related travel restrictions.

As we know, we need to enhance in-person interactions to form close-knit friendships. Similarly, for classroom concepts, such as shared cultures and civilisations, to come to life – we need in-person interactions. So, I was delighted that 41 junior college students in the Malay Language Elective Programme had the chance to visit Selangor and Ipoh last year to attend classes at the Universiti Putra Malaysia where they learned about Malay heritage and even tried their hand at making fermented fish in Kampung Beng in Ipoh!

Importantly, such educational exchanges are not limited to our students. Teachers are also encouraged to build their professional networks with their Malaysian counterparts, through the E-Immersion Programme, which saw more than 30 Malay Language teachers and pedagogical leaders from the Ministry of Education (MOE) engaging their counterparts from the Sultan Idris Education University (UPSI) to exchange best practices on the teaching of the Malay language, literature and culture.

Beyond education, we are also enhancing cultural and religious exchanges. Just last month, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) hosted the religious authorities from Perak, led by its Mufti Dr Wan Zahidi Wan Teh, to discuss best practices regarding the generation of fatwa or religious advisories, and the management of asatizah or religious teachers. On the cultural front, with the Government's support, practitioners of various Malay art forms in Singapore are engaging more widely with Malaysian artists and audiences.

As close neighbours, however, we acknowledge that there will be differences on some issues from time to time. But we must seek practical ways in managing these bilateral issues and always prioritise working together to improve our peoples' lives. We intend to continue this spirit of pragmatic cooperation with Prime Minister Anwar and his team, as we build a Singapore-Malaysia relationship which our future younger generations can be proud of.

Finally, I would like to put on record our gratitude for the assistance provided by the Malaysian authorities in rescuing three Singaporeans after the tragic landslide near Genting last December.

1.45 pm

(In English): Mr Chairman, allow me to continue my speech in English.

Moving on to Singapore's relations with Indonesia. Mr Chong Kee Hiong asked about how we are stepping up our cooperation with Indonesia. As the largest economy in ASEAN and an immediate neighbour, Indonesia is a natural investment destination. Singapore has been the largest foreign investor in Indonesia since 2014 – a position we have maintained even during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Last year, I visited six Indonesian provinces for bilateral and G20 meetings. I met a wide range of political and business leaders, as well as Singaporeans living in Indonesia. Among these regions, the Riau islands (KEPRI) is geographically the closest to Singapore and we have worked well with leaders through the pandemic and we will continue to support each other's recovery. We have stepped up cooperation, especially with Batam and Bintan. This includes establishing new data centres and efforts to develop tech talent, which could support the rapidly growing tech sectors in both Singapore and Indonesia.

There are new growth areas, for example, Indonesian companies are keen to boost exports to Singapore in the agri-food and energy sectors, which aligns with Singapore's efforts to strengthen domestic food supply and security. Economic Development Board, together with Enterprise Singapore and Singapore Food Agency, have been working to increase our imports of hydroponic vegetables from Batam.

To accelerate digital transformation and raise skill levels, the MOE and the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology signed a Human Capital Partnership Agreement last year to strengthen our cooperation in technical and vocational education and training. The MFA also supports these efforts by offering relevant capacity-building courses under the Singapore Cooperation Programme (SCP) for Indonesian government officials.

Indonesia is an important partner in maintaining the continued prosperity and security in the region, strengthening ASEAN centrality and relevance, and upholding the multilateral rules-based order. In November 2022, the Prime Minister attended the successful G20 Summit hosted by Indonesia against the backdrop of heightened global tensions. Singapore was happy to support Indonesia's G20 Presidency as it is important to strengthen multilateral platforms. Singapore is also extending our full support to Indonesia as ASEAN Chair this year.

Singapore will host the next Singapore-Indonesia Leaders' Retreat. This will be a good opportunity for our leaders to enhance the bilateral relationship and explore new areas of opportunities and cooperation.

We have a special, unique and close relationship with Brunei. As mentioned by Minister Vivian Balakrishnan, Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong visited Brunei at the start of the year, reaffirmed Singapore's long-term commitment to nurturing this special relationship into the next generation. In addition, Prime Minister Lee and Mdm Ho Ching attended His Majesty's 76th birthday celebration in July 2022.

We were honoured to welcome His Majesty Sultan Bolkiah last year on his fifth state visit to Singapore. That same month, His Royal Highness Crown Prince Billah visited Singapore for the eighth Singapore-Brunei Young Leaders' Programme, when both sides agreed to establish a bilateral scholarship programme.

Mr Zhulkarnain asked about how we have built on our relations with Brunei following the visits last year. During the Sultan's visit, four MOUs were signed to boost cooperation in new areas such as energy and green economy, trade and investment in food and medical products, youth education scholarship and public service capacity development.

Let me move on to other ASEAN countries. With Cambodia and Thailand, Singapore has worked closely with both to support of their successful chairmanships of ASEAN and APEC in 2022 respectively. We are also expanding our collaboration in emerging areas, such as the digital economy, innovation and sustainability.

We celebrated the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations with Vietnam and the 10th anniversary of our Strategic Partnership. Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh visited Singapore earlier this month. We look forward to a series of high-level exchanges to strengthen our trade and investment links, and expand cooperation in new areas, like renewable energy, carbon credits, digital economy and sustainable infrastructure.

President Ferdinand Marcos Jr of the Philippines visited Singapore last year for his first overseas trip since taking office. We have expanded our partnership with the Philippines, in areas ranging from digital cooperation, data privacy and counterterrorism, to water collaboration, urban development and the deployment of healthcare workers.

Last June, we started importing hydropower from Laos under the Lao PDR-Thailand-Malaysia-Singapore Power Integration Project (LTMS-PIP). This marks the first renewable energy import into Singapore and serves as a pathfinder towards an eventual ASEAN Power Grid.

In addition to the warm relations with our neighbours, ASEAN remains a cornerstone of Singapore's foreign policy. As noted by Mr Henry Kwek, the combined GDP of all 10 ASEAN countries currently stands at about US\$3 trillion. ASEAN is expected to become the fourth largest single market in the world by 2030. ASEAN is home to over 660 million people, with 60% of our population under the age of 35 – a significant demographic dividend.

We intend to enhance regional economic integration through ASEAN-led frameworks and the FTAs, which provide greater economic opportunities for our Member States. The RCEP, which came into effect at the start of 2022, eliminates the tariffs of about 92% of goods traded amongst the signatory parties. ASEAN is also pursuing FTAs with new partners like Canada. In addition, we are upgrading existing ones, such as our ASEAN-China Free Trade Area and ASEAN's FTA with Australia and New Zealand to ensure that these arrangements remain relevant in the post-pandemic economy.

Beyond trade, ASEAN is looking at how to best harness digital technology to transform our economies. The ASEAN Smart Cities Network Initiative (ASCN) was launched when we were chair of ASEAN in 2018. Two major projects are worth highlighting here. First, the ASCN Online Portal, that seeks to provide up-to-date information on ASEAN smart cities priorities. It can help position Singapore as a marketplace for ASEAN's smart cities solutions and support Singapore firms exploring commercially viable smart city projects in the region. Second, the ASEAN Smart City Investment Toolkit provides information for various options available for funding and financing smart city initiatives.

ASEAN is set to commence negotiations on an ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA) that aims to create a seamless digital trade ecosystem across the region. Such initiatives provide opportunities for our people and businesses to tap into the digital economy and narrow the digital divide within our societies.

As noted by Mr Seah Kian Peng, it has been two years since the coup in Myanmar and the region remains grave. Singapore and ASEAN remain deeply disappointed with the lack of progress in the implementation of the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus. The ASEAN Leaders reviewed this issue at their Summit in November and agreed that Myanmar will only be invited at the non-political level for the ASEAN Summits and Foreign Ministers' Meetings. Myanmar remains a member of ASEAN. We will continue engaging them at the civil service level.

Miss Rachel Ong and Mr Louis Ng asked about the humanitarian assistance that ASEAN and Singapore have provided to Myanmar.

2.00 pm

The dire situation in Myanmar has, unfortunately, diminished the prospect of a safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees. Singapore supports ASEAN's efforts to facilitate the refugees' safe return and has contributed over S\$1 million in bilateral aid to meet the urgent humanitarian needs of displaced persons. In addition, Singapore has contributed US\$100,000 to the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management. There are no quick fixes. We will work with relevant partners to scope our assistance in a way that would meet the specific needs and circumstances in the affected countries.

Looking beyond our immediate region, we are working to further deepen collaboration with other key partners.

Mr Murali Pillai asked about Singapore's relations with India post-pandemic, the steps taken both to deepen bilateral cooperation, as well as ensure that India remains engaged in the region. India is an important friend and partner to Singapore. Last September, Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong and Minister Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister Gan Kim Yong and Minister S Iswaran were in New Delhi to participate in the inaugural India-Singapore Ministerial Roundtable with their Indian counterparts. This leaders-driven platform allows both sides to

explore potential collaboration in emerging areas, such as food security, energy and green projects, and digitalisation, including enhancing digital connectivity. On 21 February 2023, Prime Minister Lee and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the linkage of the Singapore's PayNow and India's Unified Payments Interface. Singaporeans will now be able to send and receive funds from their family and friends in India in a safe, simple and cost-effective manner.

We commemorated the 30th Anniversary of ASEAN-India Dialogue Relations and the establishment of the ASEAN-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) in 2022. The CSP will serve as a springboard for mutually beneficial cooperation. This will create more opportunities for our people, and enhance contributions to an open and inclusive region.

India assumed the G20 Presidency in 2023 and we thank India for inviting Singapore to participate in G20 meetings this year. Singapore will continue to contribute constructively in the G20 framework, including in our capacity as Convenor of the Global Governance Group (3G), with a view to enhance the inclusiveness of the G20 process and strengthen the global governance.

Mr Ang Wei Neng asked how we can enhance our relations with Australia and New Zealand. With Australia, we are constantly exploring ambitious areas of cooperation under our CSP. The Singapore-Australia Green Economy Agreement (GEA) that Minister Vivian mentioned earlier is one such example. The GEA will reduce barriers to cross-border trade in clean energy, as well as green trade and investment. This, in turn, promotes the growth of green sector in our economy and creates new job opportunities for Singaporeans.

We established a new "Climate Change and Green Energy" Pillar under the Singapore-New Zealand Enhanced Partnership in April 2022. This will pave the way for low-carbon and sustainability solutions, and include initiatives on energy transition technology, carbon markets, sustainable transport and waste management.

Meanwhile, we will continue to strengthen our engagement in the Middle East and Central Asia. Mr Zhulkarnain asked about our relations with the Middle East, and Singapore's role in the Israeli-Palestine conflict. Our ties with the key Gulf countries remains excellent, and there is growing interest to deepen cooperation in areas like renewable energy, which the Gulf states have ambitious plans on. We look forward to elevating our ties with Saudi Arabia. Prime Minister met the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman on the sidelines of the APEC Economic Leaders Meeting in November 2022. Minister Vivian also visited Saudi Arabia in September 2022, while the second Saudi-Singapore Joint Committee meeting was held in November 2022. We are also glad that the Hajj for 2023 has resumed without restrictions and look forward to Saudi Arabia's favourable consideration to increase our Hajj quota, which was discussed during Prime Minister's meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed.

We enjoy excellent ties with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), our top trading partner in the Middle East. As small states and hubs in our respective regions, we share many mutual interests. There has been healthy exchange of visits between the UAE and Singapore. In May 2022, I accompanied the President to attend the mourning for the late UAE President Sheikh Khalifa. The Abu Dhabi-Singapore Joint Forum was held earlier this month and I will co-chair the Singapore-UAE Joint Committee meeting later this year.

Several high-level exchanges also took place last year with other Gulf countries. Minister K Shanmugam and I had good discussions with our counterparts during the inaugural Singapore-Oman Strategic Dialogue in December 2022. To signal our shared commitment to deepen the strategic and economic links between our two countries, we agreed on the mutual upgrade of our diplomatic relations to the Embassy level. I plan to visit Oman later this year to take a look at some of those opportunities. With Qatar, our third-largest trading partner in the region, we look forward to continued engagement as fellow small states. Last year, Senior Minister Teo Chee Hean, Minister Shanmugam and I made separate visits to meet various Qatari leaders. Later this year, Singapore will host the eighth High Level Joint Committee to explore new areas of cooperation.

We remain committed and concerned by the escalation of the violence in Israel and the West Bank. Certainly, we are always very concerned to the escalation of violence there. We are saddened by the loss of lives on both sides. There can be no justification for attacks on innocent civilians. Both Israelis and Palestinians deserve to live in peace and security. Singapore has been steadfast in our support for a negotiated two-state solution that allows both Israelis and Palestinians to live side-by-side in peace and security, in accordance with the relevant UN Security Council resolutions. As a friend of both sides, we continue to urge both Israel and the Palestinian Authority to return to direct negotiations. A two-state solution requires both sides to have the political will to negotiate with each other in good faith and make the necessary concessions. The recent decision by the Israeli government to retroactively legitimise nine outposts in the West Bank is deeply worrying. Such unilateral moves will only further heighten tensions and undermine any prospect for peace. We urge all parties to avoid taking further unilateral actions. The status quo at the Temple Mount/Haram Al Sharif should be maintained. In addition, Singapore supports Jordan's custodianship of the Christian and Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem.

Our ties with the Palestinian Authority remain strong. Both Minister Vivian and I made separate visits to Ramallah in the West Bank last year. During my visit, I officiated the opening of the Singapore Representative Office there. In October 2022, we welcomed the visit of Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Dr Mohammad Shtayyeh to Singapore. Prime Minister Shtayyeh was the first high-level Palestinian leader to visit Singapore and he expressed appreciation for Singapore's support for the Palestinian Authority's capacity building efforts. Singapore will continue to do so through the Enhanced Technical Assistance Package which we had established since 2013.

Mr Chairman, given the turbulence and challenges that the world continues to face, it is more important than ever for Singapore to further strengthen our ties with our international partners and friends. We will seek a common cause, including on pressing global issues, as well as in bilateral collaboration. In doing so, we will also find opportunities for the benefit of Singapore and Singaporeans.

The Chairman: Senior Minister of State Sim Ann.

The Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs (Ms Sim Ann): Mr Chairman, in Mandarin, please.

(In Mandarin): [Please refer to [Vernacular Speech](#) on Pg 241.] Dr Lim Wee Kiak, Ms Janet Ang and Mr Gan Thiam Poh asked about the outlook for Singapore-China relations. Singapore-China relations remain excellent. We have kept up our uniquely defined "All-Round Cooperative Partnership Progressing with the Times". Our apex bilateral cooperation platform, the JCBC, continues to reflect the breadth and depth of Singapore-China cooperation.

We concluded 19 deliverables spanning health, sustainability, green finance, tourism, trade security and others at the 18th JCBC last year. Our signature government-to-government projects in Suzhou, Tianjin and Chongqing have not only withstood the test of time, but also continued to reinvent themselves in support of both our countries' development priorities.

We will leverage the 15th anniversary of the Tianjin Eco City this year to refresh our cooperation. Our deepening cooperation in the digital and green economies, as well as on e-commerce, will increase digital connectivity between our countries, foster further business cooperation and better position us for a more sustainable future. It is with this forward-looking spirit that our bilateral relations continue to grow from strength to strength, and bring benefits to our peoples and enterprises.

There is good engagement between our leaderships. Over the past year, President Halimah and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, respectively, had good in-person meetings with President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang. Last week, I joined Minister Vivian on his visit to China. We also welcomed several delegations from China, most notably, Vice Premier Han Zheng for the 18th JCBC.

Such engagements allow us to reconnect in-person with our Chinese friends, which is necessary to build and strengthen trust. With China adjusting its pandemic management approach, we believe that we would be able to resume in-person exchanges and visits this year. We look forward to catching up with old friends, building ties with the new Chinese leadership and further strengthening bilateral relations.

(In English): Mr Chairman, please allow me to continue in English.

Ms Janet Ang asked what could be done to strengthen bilateral engagements with the US. Singapore-US relations are also excellent. Prime Minister visited the US twice last year – in March for a bilateral visit and in May for the ASEAN-US Special Summit hosted by President Joe Biden. Several Cabinet colleagues have also made visits to the US. In Singapore, we hosted visits by key members of the Biden Administration last year, including four Cabinet members Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin, Secretary of Energy Jennifer Granholm, Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas and US Trade Representative Katherine Tai. We also hosted visits by Members of Congress, including one led by then-US Speaker Nancy Pelosi. The intensity of engagements reflects the breadth and depth of our bilateral relationship.

Greater engagement with the US will benefit not just Singapore but also our region. That is why Singapore participates actively in the US' Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). Singapore is working closely with the US and other IPEF members to develop an open, inclusive and flexible framework that brings tangible benefits for our workers, businesses and communities. The US is the chair of APEC this year and has chosen the theme of "Creating a Resilient and Sustainable Future for All", to build a more interconnected, innovative and inclusive APEC region.

Beyond China and the US, Singapore is also deepening our collaboration with many other like-minded partners. Mr Gan Thiam Poh and Ms Joan Pereira asked about our plans to strengthen cooperation with other countries and partners such as Japan, the ROK, the UK, the EU and Latin America, and with emerging markets, such as those in South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Pacific Islands.

High-level exchanges were frequent with Japan and the ROK in 2022. President Halimah attended the inauguration ceremony of ROK President Yoon Suk-yeol, while Prime Minister made two working visits to Japan. We also welcomed Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio's first Official Visit to Singapore.

Digitalisation is a recurrent theme in our cooperation with Japan and the ROK. Singapore and Japan signed two Memoranda of Cooperation covering issues such as AI, cybersecurity and digital government transformation. The Korea-Singapore Digital Partnership Agreement (DPA) entered into force this January. We will continue to deepen bilateral cooperation with both Japan and the ROK.

2.15 pm

Relations with the UK and EU are underpinned by strong economic ties and our common commitment to supporting free trade and a rules-based international order. We have FTAs with both the UK and the EU. We are enhancing connectivity in the digital realm. For example, our DEA with the UK entered into force last year and we signed a DPA with the EU earlier this month.

Looking ahead, we will sign a Green Economy Framework with the UK next month, and we are also working towards launching negotiations on a Singapore-UK Investment Protection Agreement. As the gateway to the region, Singapore can play an active role to promote greater collaboration between Europe and Southeast Asia. We welcome Europe's interest to engage our region through initiatives, such as its €10 billion package for ASEAN under the EU's Global Gateway Initiative.

With Latin America, we have concluded negotiations for an FTA with MERCOSUR and signed an FTA with the Pacific Alliance. Both FTAs represent significant new opportunities for us to engage the fifth and eighth largest economic markets in the world respectively. We are also pursuing other forward-looking initiatives with partners in Latin America, such as on the digital economy, food security and carbon credits

collaboration. The latter will help us meet our Nationally Determined Contributions, while bringing sustainable development benefits and facilitating technology collaboration. To deepen our engagement of Latin America, Singapore reopened our Honorary Consulate-General in Lima, Peru and will open a new Honorary Consulate in Bogotá, Colombia.

While some parts of South Asia experienced setbacks last year, long-term growth prospects for the region are positive. In 2022, we welcomed official visits from the Foreign Ministers of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. We will continue to build on the warm ties to deepen our collaboration in areas – such as food security, infrastructure development, the digital economy and connectivity.

We have seen an uptick in our engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa. Prime Minister made his first official visit to Rwanda last June in conjunction with the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. In Kigali, Prime Minister announced the three-year Singapore-Africa Partnership Package, offering customised courses for African officials to address their development priorities in areas, such as climate change, digitalisation and smart cities. Africa has emerged as an engine of growth, and we will do more to engage the continent with 1.4 billion people. In addition, Singapore will deepen our engagement of the South Pacific, and we look forward to attending the Pacific Islands Forum later this year as a newly-admitted Dialogue Partner.

As a small country with limited manpower, we only have resident missions in 33 countries and regions. Consequently, we depend on the excellent support of our NRAs. Mr Raj Joshua Thomas sought an assessment of the NRA scheme.

Our 46 NRAs accredited to 48 countries and four International Organisations amplify Singapore's diplomatic outreach and nurture our ties with various partners, especially in places where we do not have a diplomatic mission. Our NRAs are reputable individuals both in the public and private sectors, who have distinguished themselves in the fields of their respective professions and have contributed extensively to the community. We assess their performance regularly as part of the NRA appointment process. We constantly evaluate our diplomatic relations, review our scope of coverage, and will appoint NRAs to countries of interest to Singapore.

Besides our contributions to international norm-setting which Minister Vivian had spoken about earlier, Singapore also extends our support to other countries in different ways. Mr Louis Ng asked about our contributions to the UNHCR and Miss Cheryl Chan asked how the SCP is evolving to better meet regional and global challenges. Besides the UNHCR, Singapore makes annual voluntary financial contributions to a range of UN funds and programmes, and other international organisations and humanitarian mandates. Some examples are the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), UN Development Programme, the International Committee for the Red Cross, UN Women and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). We review the quantum of our contributions regularly and have increased our contribution to OCHA this year.

Singapore focuses especially on capacity-building in developing countries by extending technical assistance and training. Twenty twenty-two marked the 30th anniversary of the SCP. Close to 150,000 foreign officials have taken part in the SCP and we have continually adjusted our courses to respond to the evolving needs of developing countries. We refined our health-related courses to strengthen pandemic resilience and gave greater focus to digital transformation. We also launched a new Sustainability Action Package to support the capacity-building priorities of developing countries on sustainability and climate change.

Mr Liang Eng Hwa, Mr Desmond Choo and Mr Cheng Hsing Yao asked about MFA's consular assistance to Singaporeans. Singaporeans travel very widely and sometimes need help urgently. During the pandemic, we resolved to "leave no Singaporean behind".

Consular work is, thus, one of MFA's core functions. MFA officers in our Overseas Missions have worked tirelessly under challenging conditions to respond swiftly to changing local environments. For example, our Consulate-General in Shanghai partnered with the Singapore Global Network and the Singaporean community groups to distribute basic necessities to Singaporeans who faced difficulties in procuring these items during a period of strict COVID-19 lockdown last year.

With the easing of travel restrictions, MFA has assisted more Singaporeans overseas. In 2022, MFA facilitated the issuance of 730 Documents of Identity, a temporary travel document for Singaporeans who have lost their passports overseas to travel home. This figure was twice that of pre-COVID-19 numbers in 2019.

MFA also assisted with several complex emergencies, including the evacuation of Singaporeans from conflict areas. We worked with our Thai counterparts to facilitate the departure of a Singaporean mother, Olivia, and her baby from Ukraine, where Singapore does not have a diplomatic mission. Throughout their journey home through Romania, our MFA officers kept in close contact with Olivia to check on their well-being and provide reassurance. This reflects the human and personal touch in MFA's consular assistance, which we endeavour to provide.

To ensure that MFA continues to deliver prompt and effective consular services to overseas Singaporeans, we continually review and improve on our processes. We have harnessed digital technology to launch online applications for Documents of Identity. We have also established a new consular corps of professional first responders to provide 24/7 consular response and assistance to Singaporeans. To help Singaporeans better prepare for their trips, MFA has embarked on new publicity efforts to raise awareness of MFA's consular services. For example, the "Be Informed. Be Prepared. Travel Safe." campaign reminds Singaporeans to e-register, purchase comprehensive travel insurance, and provide tips on how to stay safe while travelling.

The safety and well-being of overseas Singaporeans is MFA's priority. Unfortunately, our officers have occasionally been subjected to abusive behaviour or encountered unreasonable requests, such as receiving Singaporeans at airports, providing security escort services, or interfering in overseas legal or commercial disputes. MFA is legally constrained in such cases. I would like to take this opportunity to

stress that our MFA officers will do their very best to assist every Singaporean with a genuine need for consular assistance and within the permissible legal boundaries.

At the heart of MFA's work is a corps of dedicated officers at the frontlines of Singapore's diplomacy every day. Ms He Ting Ru asked about the challenges faced by and the strengths that women bring to the table in diplomacy. Half of Singapore's foreign service is made up of women. Our women serve with courage and distinction at all levels in MFA, including in Senior Management as well as our Ambassadors, bringing to the table a natural collaborative and problem-solving instinct.

An MFA career is very challenging, for both men and women alike. The long hours, urgent demands, frequent travel and extended time away from home can take a toll on family life. MFA has in place support systems that help our officers balance the demands of their professional and personal lives. For instance, there are provisions that make it conducive for their immediate families to go on post with the officers and support them in maintaining links with their families in Singapore. MFA officers have demonstrated resilience and determination amidst all these challenges. I would like to take this opportunity to extend my sincere thanks to our MFA officers and their families, for their unwavering dedication and sacrifice in service of our nation.

Mr Gerald Giam asked how we have been engaging Singaporeans on foreign policy and what can be done to counter harmful narratives by foreign actors. Singapore is an open society with a free flow of information. All countries seek to influence our people and some even interfere outright in our domestic issues. Singaporeans must be aware of this danger and not be unwitting vectors of foreign influence. It is, therefore, critical that Singaporeans understand our national interests and foreign policy objectives. Our domestic politics stops at the border and we forge consensus on our foreign policy.

Our first and most important line of defence is a vigilant and well-informed citizenry that recognises the geostrategic forces at play and understands our national interests. Minister Vivian, Second Minister Maliki and I, as well as our Ambassadors overseas, our retired Ambassadors and MFA officers have been engaging Singaporeans overseas and in Singapore. We do so in schools, through youth organisations and other platforms to communicate Singapore's core interests and the fundamental principles of our foreign policy. We will continue to reach out to all Singaporeans.

Mr Chairman and Members of this House, foreign policy begins at home. If we can stay united and work together, we can make Singapore a safe and secure nation in these complex and turbulent times.

The Chairman: Clarifications, please. Mr Vikram Nair.

Mr Vikram Nair: I thank the two Ministers and Senior Minister of State. I have one clarification on the China-US matter. It is clear that Singapore has extensive and deep relations with both countries. Is there anything that Singapore has envisioned to try and bring both parties together on some of the difficult issues?

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan: We do have good, deep constructive relations with both parties. I think we should also know our place. We are not going to be able to bring them together.

But what I would say is, as a representative of Singapore, I do not have the luxury of saying one thing in Beijing and then a different thing in Washington. So, both Beijing and Washington know that when we analyse the situation and we take a decision, it is not for one side or the other. We are not a stalking horse, we are not a proxy. We call it the way we see it as a tiny city-state in the heart of Southeast Asia, dependent on world trade. They also know that we will be consistently reliable, we are good for our word.

2.30 pm

Taking this kind of posture – thinking straight, being consistent, being very clear where we come from – in fact, I have found to be a very good and useful way to engage superpowers.

So, we know our place but we also are useful and credible.

The Chairman: Ms Sylvia Lim.

Ms Sylvia Lim: Thank you, Sir. I have a clarification on ASEAN's approach towards Myanmar. I believe both the Minister and the Second Minister touched on this matter. From what I understood, there was an ASEAN decision to exclude Myanmar's junta leaders from ASEAN-level meetings because of disappointment with the implementation of the Five-Point Consensus. I think that decision was taken in November last year.

But at the same time, we read that a month later in December, Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs apparently hosted a regional meeting, which the junta leaders attended, and which was attended also by Foreign Ministers from Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and also, I think, from the Vietnam foreign ministry.

I understood that Singapore declined to attend, together with, perhaps, the other founding members of ASEAN – the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia.

So, two questions concerning this: one, could the Minister confirm our reasons for not wanting to attend this meeting? And secondly, does he think that the fact that some ASEAN Foreign Ministers attended shows that there is actually a difference of opinion or approach, on how ASEAN should approach Myanmar's junta leaders and the situation in Myanmar in general?

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan: Thank you. Two good questions. Let me take a step back. What is happening in Myanmar is a tragedy. It is not something that can be fixed externally. If you think about Myanmar, since independence – if you go back 70, 80 years, the end of the Second World War – unlike the rest of us, they have never been able to forge a single, all-encompassing consensus on identity and bringing all the component parts together.

That is why you, as well as everyone here, will know that Myanmar's people themselves are talented, hardworking, as motivated as anyone else to get ahead and provide for their families. But unfortunately, the political situation has not enabled Myanmar to create a situation that is conducive for its own people.

This coup – two years now in the making – has not helped. If you ask me for my opinion, I think it is a dead end. It is not going to lead to a road where you will achieve national reconciliation, national reconstruction, the forging of a national identity, the protection of minorities, the uplift of its economy, of its capacity, of its people.

Having said that, we must also be very clear that we do not believe in foreign interference in domestic affairs. So, nothing that we do can solve the problem if the key stakeholders within their society themselves are not prepared to sit down and have an honest-to-goodness conversation with each other, for the sake of the future of their people.

We must understand that although we clearly disapprove of the coup and we do not recognise the current military junta in Myanmar, it does not give ASEAN a licence to interfere in its domestic affairs. I hope you agree with me that it is necessary for us to take this principled, but restrained, position on Myanmar.

The Member's first question was about representation. In April 2021, when our Leaders met in Jakarta – there was a special ASEAN meeting called for that – that was the meeting that created the Five-Point Consensus, the consensus amongst the ASEAN Leaders present.

Unfortunately, there has been no significant progress. Later on that year, we decided that Myanmar will not participate at a political level in ASEAN meetings. You can argue about why there is this distinction between the political level and the civil service.

The reason for that is because Myanmar remains a member of ASEAN and we do want it to continue to enjoy the benefits of membership to the extent possible within the constraints of its own domestic politics. We want it to be able to access information which is available to ASEAN. That is why we say, "We are not keeping any secrets from you. You have a seat at the table."

In fact, if you watch the videos of ASEAN leaders' meetings or the foreign ministers' meetings, there is an empty chair. We do not insist on an empty chair. We say, "Do not send a political representative because we do not recognise the coup and the military authorities; but by all means, send the most senior civil servant, the Permanent Secretary or the equivalent." Myanmar refuses and would rather keep the chair empty.

Our Leaders met again in November and reaffirmed this decision, that at the summit and at meetings of Foreign Ministers, there shall be no political representation from Myanmar. We have maintained that position since then.

I should also say that it does not mean that everyone views the problem in Myanmar through the same prism. Clearly, the immediate neighbours who face risks of refugee outflows would be in a greater hurry to see a resolution, and perhaps, may be prepared to compromise more on the resolution.

For us, we are maintaining a principled position of disapproval. But whilst the political leaders of Myanmar are not represented at the Summit at the foreign ministers' level, it does not mean that there is no communication, no engagement.

I think we need to maintain those lines. To give you a short answer, why did I not go for that meeting, which was apparently convened by Thailand?

First of all, it was not an ASEAN meeting. It was a bilateral meeting between Thailand and presumably the junta leaders. He had opened the invitation to others. I did not think our participation in such a format would be helpful.

But have I spoken to the people in the junta in the past? Yes, I have. Will I speak to them? Yes, I will. But what will I tell them? I will tell them what our views are and that we will not interfere, but we do not want to make things worse and our suggestion is – stick to the Five-Point Consensus, release the political detainees, allow Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and President U Win Myint to sit down at a table and discuss the future with the military authorities in Myanmar.

I hope you understand why there is a certain amount of restraint but, at the same time, effective engagement is necessary. Let us have no illusions. This is a very difficult and complex problem. I have no idea how long it will take to resolve.

The Chairman: Mr Louis Ng.

Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang: I almost want to say I have to apologise for whatever I have done again. I know Minister Vivian is very concerned about refugees and has also personally visited the refugee camp. So, two clarifications on that point.

As I shared in my cut, it has been six years since we increased our contributions to the UNHCR. I think the reply is that we are not doing it now. So, could I just ask when is the next review for our contributions to UNHCR?

Second, I really do hope we can consider some limited scholarships to a limited number of refugees, so that we can give them some hope and, perhaps, some future in this world we live in.

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan: Like Mr Louis Ng, I have been at the refugee camp at Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, but even that was some years ago. The first thing I should say is Bangladesh has, in fact, been extremely generous all these years in hosting and supporting the refugees. If you had gone to that camp, you would also have noticed that there are multiple agencies, multiple UN agencies and in fact, other countries also, who are providing assistance.

Unfortunately, the real solution is not just assistance at the camp – even though that is urgent and essential. The real solution is national reconciliation and peace within Myanmar. Because without that, the refugees will not or will choose not to return home, because they worry about their safety for themselves and their family members.

So, we continue to support and to work through ASEAN. For instance, we have the ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance Package. We have a centre that sends teams on the ground to do needs assessment and depending on their reports, we will be prepared, if necessary, to step up assistance to the people on the ground in Myanmar.

The answer is not "no". The answer is, we hope for a definitive solution. But in the meantime, assistance will be needed, humanitarian assistance would be needed, and we will continue to do so, primarily working through ASEAN.

The Chairman: Mr Gerald Giam.

Mr Gerald Giam Yean Song: Sir, I acknowledge the extreme complexity of the situation in Myanmar and I do not for a minute think that there are, sadly, simple solutions to it. However, I would like more clarity on the Minister's answers to my questions just now.

I asked, has Singapore ever pushed at the ASEAN Summit for a decision to be taken, by a vote, on issues where arriving at a consensus is impossible? As the Minister alluded, this is provided for in Article 22 of the ASEAN Charter. Just now, the Minister mentioned that Myanmar's participation at the political level was reduced. Was that decision to bar Myanmar's participation at the political level arrived at by consensus or was it a vote?

More fundamentally, is Singapore open to considering alternative decision-making mechanisms at ASEAN? Or is MFA's position that sticking to the consensus decision-making approach in all cases best serves Singapore's interests? The Minister has stated that decision by consensus in ASEAN is a feature, it is not a bug. However, does the Minister agree that sometimes features do not work well in all situations?

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan: Thank you. No other regional organisation – if you just look at the 10 of us or soon to be 11 – has the great diversity in the economy, forms of government, you have got absolute monarchies, constitutional monarchies, democracies of various shades and, sometimes, even outcomes of coups. If you look at language, culture, religion – there is no other regional organisation that I can think of with that range of diversity. So, that is the first point – to understand that.

Then, we go back in history – why the consensus principle? It has everything to do with diversity. In the midst of diversity, you must remember, it is very important to protect, especially, a community or state or body of opinion that may be a minority at that point in time.

So, you are right. When consensus is abused, it becomes an avenue for everyone to take hostages and to, loosely, threaten a veto. I recognise that danger. But actually in practice, knowing that you have to seek consensus creates a whole level of additional consultations, negotiations, compromises, imaginative diplomacy, which would not be present if everyone had easy access to just majoritarian voting.

2.45 pm

I explain this at some length, so that you understand why I believe there was good reason for the founders of ASEAN to design the consensus principle. Whilst I recognise the challenges, it is not something that I am keen to lightly abandon or change.

Coming specifically to Myanmar as a work example. When the leaders gathered in April 2021, obviously, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the State Counsellor of Myanmar and President Win Myint could not attend; they were detained. The other nine ASEAN leaders were present or sent designated envoys who could act with their authority.

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the commander of the Tatmadaw, the Myanmar Armed Forces, attended that meeting. We did not view his attendance as conferring legitimacy upon him or giving him the status of a Head of State. Nevertheless, as far as we are concerned, the decision on the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus was made at that meeting.

Subsequent decisions made, for instance, on the question of political representation, initially made at Foreign Ministers' level and ultimately affirmed at the Leaders' level. Again, the coup leader was not present at the table.

As far as I am concerned, there was consensus from the ASEAN Leaders, legitimately recognised by each other, the consensus principle continues to operate. More importantly, we have not allowed Myanmar to hold us hostage and force us to expedite, for instance, recognising the coup outcome so that we can conduct business as usual. At the same time, we have been able to express a view that enjoys consensus amongst all the other members of ASEAN.

In life, when you are dealing with complicated situations, be very, very wary about quick fixes and about resorting to simply raising hands. Sometimes, there are issues for which dialogue, engagement and/or arguments are better conducted, even if it is in a prolonged phase, but with honesty and good faith, I think we can make progress.

You obviously have read the ASEAN Charter. In fact, the ASEAN Charter does envisage that there will be occasions where consensus will not be possible. In those circumstances, it hands over sufficient flexibility – at least in my opinion – for the leaders to decide how to move forward.

So, all in all, as far as this work example is concerned, there will be arguments, but generally, it has worked, and ASEAN has made progress and we have been able to continue negotiations with our external partners, we have been able to sign agreements and the work has gone on. When Myanmar has a government that is legitimate and recognised as such, I am sure they will sign on to the agreements that we have made as well. But that is all the more reason why there are no secrets. They are fully privy to, and we will listen to whatever views they have to share on the agreements and negotiations that we are engaged on.

The Chairman: Mr Pritam Singh.

Mr Pritam Singh: Thank you, Chairman. Just a quick question for the Minister. This is with respect to his comments on works that had been temporarily halted on Pedra Branca. Can I confirm with the Minister: what is the timeline vis-à-vis Singapore's position on the monsoon season? When can we be expected to recommence work, precisely because the works are for the purposes of protecting against sea level rise and climate change?

Dr Vivian Balakrishnan: I am not going to give you a specific date. Ongoing discussions are occurring with Malaysia. So, I do not want to complicate it by making public announcements at this point in time.

Just to reiterate what I had said just now, we are sure that our development work is necessary and that it is fully in compliance with international law and our rights, and we will proceed in due course. But let us continue this discussion with Malaysia for the time being. There is a deadline, but I do not want to make a public pronouncement yet. I am sure you will understand.

The Chairman: Mr Vikram Nair, would you like to withdraw your amendment?

Mr Vikram Nair: I would like to thank Minister Vivian Balakrishnan, Second Minister Mohd Maliki bin Osman and Senior Minister of State Sim Ann for sharing with us the works of the Ministry, and also want to thank all the civil servants in our embassies all over the world. With that, Chairman, I beg leave to withdraw my cut.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

The sum of \$514,857,600 for Head N ordered to stand part of the Main Estimates.

The sum of \$18,000,000 for Head N ordered to stand part of the Development Estimates.

The Chairman: Order. I propose to take a break now.

Thereupon Mr Deputy Speaker left the Chair of the Committee and took the Chair of the House.

Mr Speaker: Order. I propose to take a break now. I suspend the Sitting and will take the Chair at 3.15 pm.

Sitting accordingly suspended

at 2.52 pm until 3.15 pm.

Sitting resumed at 3.15 pm.

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]
COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY – HEAD P (MINISTRY OF HOME AFFAIRS)
(A safe and secure nation in turbulent times)

The Chairman: Head P, Ministry of Home Affairs. Mr Murali Pillai.

3.16 pm
Securing Singapore through to the Future

Mr Murali Pillai (Bukit Batok): Mr Chairman, Sir, I beg leave to move, "That the total sum to be allocated for Head P of the Estimates be reduced by \$100".

On 18 February 2023, the Operation Lionheart contingent of the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF), comprising 68 officers, which included two Full-time National Servicemen (NSmen) doctors and four canines, returned home after being deployed in Türkiye for search and rescue operations. This followed the devastating earthquake that has, to-date, killed more than 50,000 people in the region.

Our officers under the command of Col Chew Keng Tok, were activated to fly to Türkiye at short notice. There, for 10 days, they operated in very difficult conditions. They had to contend with freezing temperatures, the ever-present threat of the further collapse of buildings and the calamitous security situation. In fact, rescue officers from several other countries suspended their operations owing to the prevailing security situation. Despite these challenges, our officers persisted. They saved lives, comforted many and brought honour to our country.

That our officers were able to execute their duties, in such a way as to win the admiration of the Turkish people, is a testimony to their sterling standard of training and preparedness, strong sense of duty and purpose, excellent leadership and high morale.

Sir, I am sure all hon Members of this House will join me thanking our SCDF officers, as well as that of their family members for their courage and their spirit of sacrifice, in the name of our country. *[Applause.]*

From the reports that I have read, I note that our SCDF officers' work was enabled by the technology of our Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) equipment, such as fibre-optic scopes to detect lives.

It is clear to me that technology has, and will, continue to play an increasingly important role in securing better outcomes in operations. There are a number of factors that drive this, including the reality that our Home Team's manpower is likely to remain lean and the likelihood that our Singaporeans will constantly expect more of the Home Team over time. We must, in short, do more with less.

Over the years, the Home Team has invested heavily on technology. For instance, Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA) officers leverage on video analytics and live tracking technology to maintain security at the Woodlands and Tuas checkpoints. The Singapore Prison Service (SPS) is trialling an unmanned and automated urine collection and screening system for its prison inmates.

Whilst it is correct that we, in the House, support the Home Team's investment in technology to achieve operational efficiencies, we also need to be able to gauge the effectiveness of investments. I, therefore, wish to ask the hon Minister the following questions:

How much has the Home Team invested in technological solutions in the past five years? What has been the tangible returns from these investments? What lessons have been drawn? And what would be the framework under which further investments will be made?

I also wish to understand how the Home Team Science and Technology Agency, set up in 2019, has aided the development of cost-effective science and technological capabilities for our Home Team operations.

In addition, I wish to better understand how the Police's effectiveness is being measured.

Several decades back, the Police relied on the prevalence of the five preventable crimes as a measure of its effectiveness.

Over time, these key performance indicators (KPIs) became less relevant with the emergence of new kinds of crime, such as internet-based scams.

I had previously suggested that the Police publish how much it has seized pursuant to criminal investigations and how much is returned to victims of crime as a KPI. This is done in the United Kingdom (UK).

The hon Minister informed that his Ministry does not track such data. I seek a review, as just a few days ago, the hon Minister of State announced in this House, that over a five-month period in 2022, virtual assets amounting to \$172.8 million were seized. Hence, it appears to me that there is an ability to track such data.

As I alluded to in my preceding paragraphs, even as I speak about the need for technology, I also see that there remains an irreducible human dimension in keeping Singapore safe and secure. We must ensure that our investment in developing our Home Team's human capital is kept in tandem too. What is the hon Minister's plan in this regard?

I now turn to Singapore's security situation. It seems to me, by reference to the increasing number of recent cases of young persons being self-radicalised through access to harmful online content, that there is a case to take a relook at the legislative levers to ensure that our Home Team officers, particularly the Internal Security Department (ISD), have the tools to prevent the proliferation of such cases. Otherwise, the impact on Singapore can be significant and severe.

We should remind ourselves that terrorists need only be successful once. ISD, on the other hand, has to be successful all the time. In 2022, it was announced in this House that the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) will develop a framework that will tackle online criminal activity, including content inciting violence in our community, to complement the current legislative measures. I seek an update on this matter, please.

Let me now turn to the situation in our prisons. I commend the SPS for spearheading efforts with its stakeholders to keep the recidivism rate amongst desistors relatively low and stable. The five-year recidivism rate of 39.9%, which I believe is being released for the first time this year, is an encouraging statistic, even though there is a slight increase in the two-year recidivism rate by 0.4% to 20.4%.

I was glad to note that the Government has announced in Budget 2023 the Uplifting Employment Credit (UEC) for companies to employ desistors. This was something that I pushed for in this House when I suggested that the Jobs Growth Incentive (JGI) for ex-offenders, to help them during the COVID-19 pandemic, be turned into a permanent scheme.

I think, from the experience of the JGI and the steps taken by SPS, we have an opportunity to aim for even lower recidivism rates.

The Government's UEC creates an important incentive for employers to seriously consider investing in our desistors. In turn, by being gainfully employed in good jobs that have good prospects, it gives our desistors the best chance to break free from their past.

To effect permanent changes, we have to start with the individual and work with their families too. This will not be easy, but it has to be done. I understand that SPS has, over the years, built a substantial number of volunteers who are roped in to help with reintegration support for prison inmates and desistors.

I believe that there is a case for SPS and its volunteers to partner the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), Ministry of National Development (MND) and other Government agencies to co-create bespoke plans for each desistor that has a series of incentives and disincentives during the supervision period of desistors. The purpose is to motivate desistors to be responsible family members and encourage reconciliation within their families. I truly believe that once our desistors are accepted back and reconciled with their families, the sky will be the limit for them.

As a broader point, our community must play its part to encourage our desistors to make strong contributions to their families and enrich the Singapore story. They have talent, knowledge and experience which Singapore can benefit from. We need to get behind them and signal to them that we will support them, so long as they keep on the path of rehabilitation and reintegration. Early last year, I suggested in this House that our desistors be given an opportunity to perform at our National Day Parade. Having seen them perform, I know that they will be a hit amongst Singaporeans. I understood that my suggestion was made too late for National Day Parade (NDP) 2022. I wonder whether it will be in time for NDP 2023 instead.

May I ask what strategies SPS will employ to leverage on the UEC, to help desistors overcome real-life challenges and lead crime-free lives? What is the permanent employment rate amongst our desistors? What would be the realistic stretch target for us to achieve in the years to come?

We also need to pay special attention to desistors with drug-abusing pasts. I understand that this is the group of persons who are more likely to reoffend as they struggle to steer clear from the triggers that made them consume drugs in the first place. May I ask what new measures, if any, are SPS and the Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB) proposing to deal with this admittedly intractable issue?

Mr Chairman, Sir, I have spoken on what I see to be the three elements of securing Singapore for the future. Courage is beyond price, but technology and developing the talents of our men and women in the Home Team, these require constant investments and our continued support. I look forward to hearing from the Minister and her colleagues on the issues that I have raised.

Question proposed.

New Citizen Selection Criteria

Mr Pritam Singh (Aljunied): Chairman, new citizens are going to be even more important to the future of Singapore. With our total fertility rate at the historical low of 1.05, it will not be hyperbole to say new citizens are a critical pillar in the shape of any future Singapore.

In line with the Government's Forward Singapore (Forward SG) exercise that promises a renewed social compact with citizens, we need to ask: what should Singapore's goals be when bringing in new citizens?

We want those who truly know Singapore and want to embrace the Singaporean way of life. We want those who really want to live here and be here. We want people who have already proven themselves by having integrated into the Singaporean life after some time as Permanent Residents (PRs).

Singaporeans do not want new citizens who do not want to live here, but only want the power of the Singapore passport for their convenience, and the safe and secure environment for their assets and wealth. We do not want new citizens who are reluctant for their sons to do National Service (NS) and, certainly, none of us want people who only want Singapore Citizenship as a stepping-stone to another country but, instead, seek those who have a long-term commitment to Singapore.

Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong has promised that Forward SG will move on to looking at solutions.

The Swiss, for example, have a highly specific selection process for new citizens. People must show deep commitment before granted Swiss citizenship through naturalisation. Applicants must show themselves to be successfully integrated into Switzerland and know the Swiss ways and customs.

For ordinary naturalisation, a person must have lived in Switzerland for 10 years and hold a permanent residence permit. The Swiss Naturalisation Authorities summon applicants for a personal interview which focuses on their knowledge of Switzerland. They must be able to answer questions on Swiss geography, history, politics and society.

Do we have similar requirements? For example, the latest Singapore Census 2020 revealed that 48.3% of the resident population in Singapore spoke English most frequently at home, compared to 32.3% a mere 10 years ago. Is the working proficiency in English a criterion for citizenship for better integration between new citizens and Singaporeans of all races and religion, since English is our main language of communication?

Can the Government share more details on how new citizenships are granted, as there are aspects of the process and criteria currently that are opaque? How is our system different from that of the Swiss? Is there already a point system in place and what does it consider apart from the publicly revealed criteria, such as economic contribution, educational qualification, family profile and length of stay in Singapore?

Most importantly, how will the citizenship selection process evolve in face of the Forward SG exercise and a review of the social compact?

Legislation for Online Criminal Activity

Mr Vikram Nair (Sembawang): Chairman, cybercrime is a broad area. The Police have described the two categories as cyber-enabled offences and cyber dependent offences. Cyber dependent offences are those where digital assets are the target and includes hacking, ransomware and website defacements. These of these offences are covered by the Computer Misuse Act.

On the other hand, cyber-enabled crimes relate to crimes that are facilitated by the computer and include the wide range of scams, cyber harassment, cyber extortion and illegal online gambling. These are currently covered by different pieces of legislation, including the Penal Code and the Protection from Harassment Act.

Both areas seem to have been growing. In relation to cyber dependent crimes, a total of 1.8 million web threats against Internet users were detected and blocked in Singapore between April and June 2022, according to data obtained from Kaspersky Security Network, and this was a 17.6% rise from the previous year.

On cyber-enabled crimes, The Straits Times reported that around \$661 million was lost to online scams in 2022. While there are a wide range of tools that are needed to deal with such crimes, legislation is obviously an important component. Does MHA see any gaps in the existing legislative framework to deal with cybercrime?

3.30 pm

At the Committee of Supply (COS) debate in 2022, MHA mentioned that it was working on a framework to deal with a broad suite of online criminal activity. How will this framework relate to the existing legislation?

The Chairman: Mr Christopher de Souza, both cuts please.

Home Team Transformation – Technology

Mr Christopher de Souza (Holland-Bukit Timah): Sir, as a result of technological advancements, the threat of crime is considerably more global than ever and certainly does not respect boundaries. We need to continually strengthen our technological capability, so as to detect crime, including multi-jurisdictional crimes. What is the Home Team doing to leverage on technology to battle domestic and transnational crime, and does this requires some degree of transformation of operations?

Home Team Transformation – Manpower

MHA fulfils a key function: the maintenance of order and law in Singapore. But with declining birth rates, manpower has been, and will continue to be, affected. Leveraging on technology, cooperation with the Ministry of Defence (MINDEF), partnerships with international organisations such as Interpol and good relationships with Police forces in the region are key to making up for the reducing pool of local manpower.

But in the round, manpower is still key. Ground, human judgement is key in ground ops and, therefore, how will MHA transform itself to ensure: one, that our officers continue to be world-class; and two, that our world-class officers work alongside best-in-class technology to assist in the fight against crime?

Youth Radicalisation

Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim (Chua Chu Kang): In Malay, Sir.

(In Malay): [Please refer to [Vernacular Speech](#) on Pg 242.] We have seen more cases of youth radicalisation recently and they are getting younger.

Just a few weeks ago, we were shocked with reports of two Singaporean teenagers being issued orders under the Internal Security Act (ISA) for terrorism-related activities. One of them, a 15-year-old teenager, is the youngest person to be dealt with under the ISA. The teenagers were contacts of another self-radicalised 18-year-old, who was also detained by ISD last December.

Although they were self-radicalised separately, they subsequently became acquainted online. The teenagers joined multiple extremist-themed servers on the online gaming platform Roblox. Such online gaming platforms are being used by extremist groups to disseminate their ideological beliefs. They use video games and gaming culture to attract and influence our youths.

We need to keep abreast of the technological developments and current societal trends, to prevent terrorists from abusing such online platforms to spread extremist ideologies that prey on the minds of our youths.

Can MHA provide an update on how it intends to tackle this trend?

The Chairman: Mr Christopher de Souza. You can take your three cuts, please.

Anti-terror

Mr Christopher de Souza: With the threat of self-radicalisation becoming more apparent in Singapore and around the region, stepping up our efforts in countering the threat of terrorism is key. We need to continually strengthen our regulatory framework and our detection capabilities, so as to keep a close watch on potential terror situations or threats.

How will MHA continue to partner with other states in our fight against terrorism, given that the fight is not one that exists in vacuum? Further, how is the Home Team transforming its operational capabilities, such as to prevent terrorist financing and to prevent money laundering in relation to terrorism?

Fight against Tolerance to Drugs

Sir, Singapore has had a long and hard stance against drugs. It has benefited our nation. However, there is a gradually growing perception that drugs are less harmful or not harmful if used just socially. But it is obvious that experimental drug use can lead to addiction.

How does MHA intend to reinvent and transform its engagements and messages regarding the growing tolerance to drugs? In particular, how will MHA explain that the liberalisation of recreational drug use in other countries, including those in the region, will in every likelihood lead to massive long-term societal harm? Such brutally honest messaging could achieve the deterrent effect needed to puncture the growing tolerance to drugs.

The Battle against the Lure of Cannabis

Sir, Singapore is seeing a rise among younger members of society in terms of usage of cannabis. Youths form a significant proportion of new abusers of illicit drugs. We need to continue and readily impart drug-free values to the next generation, and educate and inculcate the understanding that addiction is not without consequences. Families can be torn apart by addiction and what is more, widespread addiction can lead to devastating consequences on our society as a whole.

How does MHA intend to ramp up its engagement of our youths regarding the dangers of drug abuse, especially in the light of the growing and dangerous lure of cannabis?

Prevention of Drug Abuse

Mr Gan Thiam Poh (Ang Mo Kio): Chairman, I support our zero-tolerance stance against drugs. Unfortunately, as some other countries resort to legalising and decriminalising drugs, such a liberal attitude towards narcotics has been spreading through social media and other channels. This may have an impact on certain segments of our society, including some youths. How will MHA proceed with its efforts to prevent drug abuse?

Drug Offences Recidivism

Mr Raj Joshua Thomas (Nominated Member): Sir, the SPS recently released statistics of the drug offences recidivism rates. Both the two-year recidivism rate at 26.1% and the five-year recidivism rate at 45.2%, were up. Separately, the consistently higher five-year rates point to the fact that, over the longer term, the chances of re-offending are higher. This could be because former offenders are more likely to fall in with bad company and into their old ways once Government support tapers off.

Yellow Ribbon Singapore (YRSG) looks at rebuilding the lives of former inmates and ex-offenders through skills and career development. There are excellent programmes, like training even before an inmate is released and career coaching. Could the Minister elaborate on MHA and YRSG's plans in the coming year for programmes specifically targeting the two- to five-year period after an ex-offender for drug offences has been released? It appears from the statistics that this is an important period to have ongoing programmes.

Furthermore, recidivism should be tackled not only through helping ex-offenders get jobs, but through community support as well. I would like to ask whether the Ministry will consider expanding the role of YRSG to cover holistic rehabilitation of ex-offenders beyond skills and career development, and that will empower YRSG to also be somewhat of a coordinating body, for all the various efforts by various Government bodies to tackle recidivism, including community efforts and long-term programmes up to, and even beyond, five years.

YRSG held its second CARE Network Summit in 2022. Could I ask the Minister to elaborate on what outcomes from that summit will be implemented by YRSG this year, or that YRSG is considering? How will community groups and employers be involved?

I would also like to ask, Sir, how does YRSG actively reach out and provide support to families of offenders and ex-offenders, and could the Minister elaborate on YRSG's plans for this year in this area?

Drug laws, Sir, has been liberalised in many countries, including neighbouring countries. Could I ask the Minister, how would the Government ameliorate the effect of a stepped-up anti-drug campaign on ex-offenders, such that we do not see a resurgence of stigmatisation?

Recidivism and Reintegration

Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim: Sir, Singapore's two-year recidivism rates are not only the lowest in the world, but also our lowest in 30 years. As a Board Member of YRSG, I am proud of all the efforts made by the entire ecosystem of support from the SPS, MHA, community partners and employers to assist us in the reintegration effort.

As mentioned in my COS speech last year, we need "offenders" to become "overcomers" – overcoming the challenges in life in a whole-of-society approach. I welcome that SPS now use the term "desistors", which helps to remove the stigma of incarceration.

While the numbers are good, we cannot rest on our laurels. We should tackle long-term recidivism rates on a five-year period horizon. How does MHA intend to further reduce the long-term recidivism rates of ex-offenders?

The Chairman: Mr Christopher de Souza. Both cuts, please.

Acceptance of Ex-offenders

Mr Christopher de Souza: Sir, many former offenders find themselves to be the target of the invisible bars of prejudice and suspicion, making their process of rehabilitation and reintegration into society that much more challenging. By raising more awareness to accept former offenders as fellow and equal members of society, we can generate greater public support which could translate into a greater number of volunteers for the Community Action for the Rehabilitation of Ex-offenders (CARE) Network, the Yellow Ribbon Project and other aftercare programmes. How is MHA creating awareness and generating acceptance for our former offenders, in order to facilitate their transition and welcoming back into society?

Mentorship Programmes for Ex-offenders

Sir, we must make a concerted effort to welcome former offenders into our society after their release. Such a welcoming attitude will also reduce the chance of re-offending and, possibly, even heal families. In the road to recovery and reintegration, mentorship is key. How can MHA and the SPS continue to enhance the provision of post-release mentorship schemes for our former offenders?

Employability of Ex-offenders

Dr Tan Wu Meng (Jurong): Chairman, I have met Clementi residents who are ex-offenders. Some were in prison for many years, and upon release, find that the job market has changed from the days before. Some are older, having been in and out of incarceration and now are dealing with health conditions, even as they are trying to find work. Finding work, finding a job – it is part of the recovery journey, the rehabilitation journey, rebuilding a life while coming back into society.

What is MHA doing to improve the employability of ex-offenders who are rebuilding their lives, and how are we recognising employers who are inclusive, employers who lean in to give someone that second chance in life?

Yellow Ribbon and Criminal Records

Mr Patrick Tay Teck Guan (Pioneer): As part of our #EveryWorkerMatters conversation exercise last month, together with my National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) colleagues and volunteers, I had the great opportunity to host a dialogue session at our NTUC premises for more than 100 employers, ex-offenders, YRSG, SPS and New Charis Mission friends. This is the first time that NTUC and the Labour Movement has engaged this community for a dialogue.

On another occasion earlier this month, my team and I had an opportunity to engage a group of inmates at Changi Prison as part of our #EveryWorkerMatters conversation to share as well as hear their thoughts on jobs, training, skills and employment and employability in general. I applaud the work of YRSG and SPS and for making our engagement possible, so that we can hear first-hand from the community as we forge a new workers' compact.

As much as it was happy to hear some employers leaning forward to help and hire ex-offenders, we hear the fears and anxieties from the inmates who are soon to be released and wanting to reintegrate back into society as well as find decent work when they are out.

In this respect, I wish to make three points.

First, I wish to know what is being done thus far and the plans of SPS and YRSG in this important space to help in the employment and employability needs of ex-offenders.

Second, I hope that MHA will consider reviewing the Registration of Criminals Act in the treatment and type of offences that are spent, including the duration of the past offence before a criminal record is spent. This area has not been reviewed for a long time and I hope the review will be able to give ex-offenders a higher chance of employment and employability when they re-enter into the workforce and society.

3.45 pm

Third, taking off my interaction with the community, I suggest that MHA give more support for halfway houses and shelters specially catered for women, including those run by charities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and religious organisations.

Collaboration with Malay/Muslim Community

Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim: Sir, in Malay.

(In Malay): [Please refer to [Vernacular Speech](#) on Pg 243.] The number of new Malay drug abusers arrested has decreased by 21% in 2022, compared to the previous year. In 2021, the number of Malay drug offenders arrested dropped by 15%; compared to other communities who declined by 7%.

This statistic shows that efforts by CNB and our community, through the close cooperation of the *Dadah Is Haram* Campaign, M³ and other Malay/Muslim bodies, have yielded results.

Our Malay/Muslim community has also greatly supported the *Dadah Is Haram* Campaign through a network of more than 70 mosques throughout Singapore and volunteers. Apart from that, the FITRAH program by M³ and our Malay/Muslim Organisations Rehabilitation Network have also helped to combat the scourge of drugs and its impact on our community.

Chairman, therefore, I would like to ask what is MHA's plan to continue working with our Malay/Muslim community to help offenders and ex-offenders within our community?

Regularising Security Officer Work Hours

Mr Raj Joshua Thomas: Sir, security officer working hours in both private and Government contracts are typically 12-hours a day, six days a week. Such working hours are unreasonable and unsustainable.

I would like to ask if the Government will take the lead to regularise working hours for security officers in Government security contracts, including to give more weightage at the evaluation stage of outcome-based security contracts, to tender bids that propose shorter working hours for security officers. Let us ensure that our security officers are not left behind in all this talk of work-life balance.

The Chairman: Mr Derrick Goh. Not here. Mr Sitoh Yih Pin.

The Threat of Scams

Mr Sitoh Yih Pin (Potong Pasir): Mr Chairman, the recent statistics that were released by the Police on scams has surely captured our attention on the threat that scams are causing in the community. That the Police released this set of statistics separate and distinct from other crime numbers for the first time, shows that scams are fast becoming a major cause of concern.

The numbers are quite astounding. Year on year, the total amount reported to have been cheated from all scams rose from \$632 million in 2021 to \$660.7 million in 2022. The number of scams and cybercrime cases increased by about 25%, from 26,886 in 2021, to 33,669 in 2022.

And for those of us who think that seniors are generally the vulnerable class in society that are more susceptible to being scammed, we know that the cases involving seniors only amount to 8.8% of all cases. A whopping 79.4% of cases involved individuals from the ages of 10 to 49 years of age.

Anecdotally, I am sure all of us have heard of many stories of scams. As representatives in this House, we will also have met many residents who have sought our assistance when scammed.

Not so long ago, I remember that the concern was mainly about phishing links, sent by emails, digital messages or on social media. Raising awareness on such modus operandi was easier. We warned one another not to click on links immediately, to always question and verify before proceeding.

Scams have evolved quite significantly since then. There are now scams that appear to be innocuous, but end up being most insidious. Scammers masquerade as love interests, friends who have changed numbers and are in need of assistance, or even promise what appeared to be legitimate jobs but end up cheating, often times, the life savings of individuals. Some scams even play the long game for many months, slowly cheating not only money, but also causing great emotional turmoil to its victims.

Perhaps, what is the most alarming about scams, is the fact that it is often the case that these scams originate from overseas, and once money is transferred to another account, it promptly leaves our shores and jurisdiction almost instantaneously. This makes the task of the Police, no matter how well-trained and determined they are, all the more challenging in arresting scammers and, especially, in their efforts to retrieve the stolen monies for the victims.

Given the insidious threat of scams and the disproportionate harm it brings to its victims, I hope that the Government will take steps to augment its support of the Police, by legislation or otherwise, to work with industry partners, such as our financial institutions and other stakeholders, in the process to combat scams and protect the community.

In the premise, I invite the Minister to share with this House, the steps that the Government is taking to address the threat of scams in the community, whether the Ministry has plans to strengthen legislation to combat scams and the efforts that are being made to educate and keep the public informed of the latest developments, so that Singaporeans can take the necessary precautions against scams.

Support for Scam Victims

Dr Shahira Abdullah (Nominated Member): Chairman, scam victims suffer more than just financial losses. It often takes a toll on them physically, mentally and socially. Many may be too embarrassed to seek help. Victims feel anxiety, shame and helplessness, and a variety of other emotions which may lead to depression, tension and stress. The deep shame may also prevent these victims from seeking help. They may also engage in self-harm or turn suicidal.

The Anti-Scam Centre was set up last year as a collaboration between Singapore Police Force (SPF) and six banks. Building on that, could I also suggest having a one-stop unit that collaborates with relevant agencies and professionals dedicated to assisting scam victims amid a scam, or after they have fallen prey to the scam? This unit could ensure that vulnerable groups, such as the deaf – who may not be able to utilise the phone hotlines – can get timely help. Post-scam, frontline officers from the Police or banks could refer victims to this "Post-Scam" Unit to better address their financial and mental needs promptly.

Financially, the unit can assess the victim's financial needs, provide information about financial support services and refer the victim to relevant social service agencies. Emotionally, the Post-Scam Unit would be equipped to assess their mental health needs and provide immediate emotional support, if needed, to prevent further deterioration in their mental well-being. The unit can then refer the victim to follow-up mental health services and support groups.

Finally, the unit can follow up with the victim, after the initial report to check on their well-being and provide additional support if needed. They can also provide updates on the status of the investigation and any support services that may be available to the victim.

The Chairman: Mr Christopher de Souza, you can take your four cuts, please.

Online Scams – Shutting Mule Accounts

Mr Christopher de Souza: Sir, money mule accounts are a serious issue and the impending changing of the law is good. Laws need to be regularly reviewed to respond to the fast-evolving nature of the scams.

There needs to be sufficient flexibility within the legislation and subsidiary legislation. People are being lured by easy money to sell their Singpass details and bank accounts for purposes, such as money laundering, facilitating unauthorised access to computer material and carrying out unlicensed businesses.

How is MHA aiming to reduce the prevalence of money mule accounts and lower the incidence of people selling their personal details and bank accounts?

Combatting Online Scams Using Technology

Sir, scammers are getting increasingly diverse in the forms of scams that they are able to carry out with the use of new technology, artificial intelligence (AI) and over the Internet. To build a strong digital infrastructure to prevent scams, we need to utilise technology, such as big data, to be able to spot common patterns, to highlight suspicious transactions and websites with scammers spoofing e-commerce platforms, fake friend call scams and impersonation scams.

How is MHA using technology and partnering with various stakeholders to further flag out suspicious transactions, for our digital infrastructure needs to develop, to put up more barriers and warnings against phishing and other forms of data theft?

Multi-pronged Way to Fight Online Scams

Sir, a collective multi-pronged approach to fight scams is necessary, given the nature of online scams. This includes not just Government agencies and banks, but telcos' customers and consumers, and the community at large.

How is the Government working in tandem with the various sectors, in order to develop specific and targeted approaches to dealing with different sorts of scams particularly, because scams evolve quickly? What infrastructure is in place to respond to new forms of scams across the various industries, such that all stakeholders are informed and play their part in collectively combatting the threat?

Raising Awareness to Deter Online Scams

Sir, we need a strong public awareness regarding the nature of scams and the various forms they take.

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of scams, including e-commerce scams, Internet love scams and investment scams. These scams are particularly difficult to track and counter, because these deal with daily life and, to some extent, human sentiment and human emotion.

Given how fast scams can evolve and new scams can appear, we need to be able to quickly inform the public, especially the targeted groups that are most vulnerable to a particular form of scam. Increasing public awareness is one key plank.

How is the Government working to continually update the public on new forms of scams, and keeping up with its public education and awareness efforts?

Online Scams

Mr Vikram Nair: Chairman, earlier this month, the Police released data on cybercrime which was reported by CNA, and the figures were sobering. The amount lost to online scams the last two years has been staggering, around \$632 million in 2021 and \$661 million in 2022.

The total number of cybercrime cases rose by around 25% to 33,669 cases, compared to 26,886 cases the year before. Scams accounted for 94.2% of these cases. Of these cybercrime cases, scams accounted for 94%.

The top five scam types were phishing scams, job scams, e-commerce scams, investment scams and fake friend call scams. They made up about 80% of the top 10 scams.

The largest amounts lost were to investment scams, about \$198.8 million, followed by job scams, which caused around \$117.4 million in losses. Somewhat surprisingly, at least to me, the largest group of victims were young adults, aged 20 to 39, who made up around 53% of all victims.

It is good that the Police is keeping tracks and close tabs on cybercrime data and able to produce such information on the issue. I am interested to know what steps are being taken to combat cybercrime, and whether the existing steps are enough. In particular, I wonder whether the Police believe any further steps need to be taken in educating the public better, as well as steps that are required to catch and

prosecute the perpetrators.

Where these perpetrators are abroad, which I believe happens in many of the scams, have we had any success in capturing the perpetrators and/or recovering assets for victims?

The Chairman: Mr Derrick Goh, you can take your earlier cut as well.

Concerning Increase in Youth Crimes

Mr Derrick Goh (Nee Soon): Chairman, I mentioned in our Budget debate about the worrying trend we are seeing, where youths perpetuating crimes is on the increase.

On the scams front, SPF reported that a majority of those arrested for e-commerce scams were youths. For first half of 2022, almost 60% of arrestees for e-commerce scams were aged below 29.

4.00 pm

While Singapore has been steadfast in its zero-tolerance approach towards drugs, even amid more liberal attitudes towards the use of drugs both internationally and in the region, such as in Thailand, CNB has also highlighted a worrying trend of more youths abusing cannabis.

While the drug situation in Singapore remains largely curbed, CNB reported that cannabis abusers arrested in 2022 climbed 71% to 236. Worryingly, over 60% of arrestees were aged below 30, and some even as young as 14.

This is complicated by the continued emergence of new psychoactive substances and a quadrupling of vaping cases from 2020 to 2022. Such illicit habits appeal more to the youth and could be gateways to other forms of harder substance abuse, as well as give rise to other social ills and offences. Moreover, accessibility to these harms is easily facilitated in the digital space, where youths can deal anonymously, which could be challenging for our agencies to detect.

What is equally concerning is that in most cases, parents did not seem to be aware of their child's involvement with such harms. Can MHA explain its plans on how it can deepen engagement with all stakeholders in the ecosystem – parents, schools, youth groups, media platforms, and so on, to identify at-risk youths for more timely and effective intervention? What further measures will MHA take to address this worrying trend of youth perpetrating crimes?

Stepping Up Efforts to Combat Scams

Despite the increased and commendable efforts by MHA and its partners, the scourge of scams remains unabated and continues to evolve. The year 2022 saw both a record 34,000 cases and a loss of well over S\$660 million. This means that in the past two years, close to over S\$1.3 billion has been lost to scams.

A discerning public is our first line of defence. MHA has been strengthening public education efforts, through the ACT Against Scams campaign and by encouraging residents to download the ScamShield app.

The Anti-Scam Command has also done well, partnering local banks to freeze more than 16,700 bank accounts and telcos to terminate more than 6,500 lines, thereby preventing a further loss of about S\$146 million in 2022. Noteworthy, is the step up in anti-scam enforcements, such as the recent island-wide operation in February, where over 500 scammers and money mules were arrested.

Unlike physical crimes, scams are perpetrated by highly organised transnational syndicates and conducted swiftly in the digital space; and experts have also spoken about sophisticated operations that are aided by AI.

Combatting scams, hence, requires a concerted "all-hands-on-deck" response. MHA should build upon its success to further deepen international co-operation with foreign law enforcement agencies, and partnerships with stakeholders like, for example, platform providers, communication and social media firms, as well as e-commerce players in the digital value chain. To be effective, these stakeholders, who themselves benefit and profit from the digital ecosystem, need to do more and have accountability clearly assigned, to drive more proactive upstream prevention of scams.

This will become important as recent trends show that while the number of scams have increased, the amount lost per transaction is smaller on average. This trend is expected to worsen as frictionless payments increase along with more cross-border linkages, such as the link-up of Singapore's PayNow with Thailand's PromptPay and, as announced last week, India's UPI.

We are an international and well-digitalised financial centre. This makes us inevitably prone to cybercrimes. There is a pressing need for us to swiftly and resolutely act against scams to uphold public trust, as the digital world becomes more complex with greater cybersecurity risks.

Singapore has often been lauded as one of the safest cities in the world, and we should uphold this standing in the digital sphere too.

The Chairman: Minister Josephine Teo.

The Second Minister for Home Affairs (Mrs Josephine Teo): Mr Chairman, at the outset, let me thank Mr Murali Pillai and Members for their recognition of our SCDF officers, as well as the team behind Operation Lionheart. They have done us proud and in a very tragic situation, we are glad that Singapore was able to make a small contribution.

Sir, Singapore remains one of the safest countries in the world. Since 2015, we have been ranked first in Gallup's Global Law and Order Report, except in 2021, when the survey was not conducted here due to the pandemic. In the 2022 World Justice Project Rule of Law Index, Singapore was ranked as one of the top three countries in "order and security", for the sixth time in a row.

These accolades do not mean that we can take our peaceful state of affairs for granted. On the contrary, given the dynamic operating environment, the Home Team is constantly challenged with emerging threats. These include foreign interferences, scams and other cybercrimes, and a more permissive global attitude towards drugs.

My MHA colleagues and I will share how we are responding to these challenges, and also address points raised by Members. Minister of State Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim will speak on our efforts to combat drug abuse, including by enhancing our rehabilitation programmes. Minister of State Sun Xueling will speak on our multi-pronged approach to tackle scams. I will speak about online crimes more generally.

We have been able to keep our country safe and secure, in large part because the public has placed a high level of trust and confidence in the Home Team, and also do their part to uphold law and order. This compact between Singaporeans and the Home Team is important and extends to the online domain. I spoke at the Smart Nation and Digital Government Group (SNDGG) COS debate about the digital social compact.

Within our security social compact, the Government enacts laws and policies, giving due consideration to all parties who have a stake. We earn the public's trust by enforcing laws in a fair and transparent manner, and by consistently delivering good safety and security outcomes.

In the online space, the Government does not set out to dictate or curtail the adoption of technology or use of online platforms. However, we have a duty to protect our citizens from online harms, the same way we deal with threats in the physical domain. The measures we take must be reasonable and calibrated. As for the individual, we have a part to play by being alert and vigilant, and by looking out for the vulnerable amongst us, who may be more susceptible to crimes carried out online.

Mr Murali Pillai, Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim and Mr Vikram Nair asked for an update on legislation to target online criminal harms. Let me share our plan.

Online harms are constantly evolving and take various forms. They include falsehoods, foreign interference and inappropriate sexual abuse material. Online mediums are also exploited to incite violence, carry out scams at scale and traffic drugs.

There is a growing international consensus for rules to combat online harms. For example, jurisdictions such as the UK, the European Union (EU), Germany and Australia have introduced or proposed new laws to regulate the online space.

Over the years, the Government has taken steps to deal with different types of harmful online content and behaviours. We introduced the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) and the Foreign Interference Countermeasures Act (FICA). The Broadcasting Act was recently amended to deal with harms that impact user safety, such as suicide and self-harm, cyberbullying and content likely to undermine racial and religious harmony. We can also block access to egregious content on online communications services, including social media platforms.

But there remain gaps. There is online content which are criminal in their own right, or content which facilitate or abet crimes. These include syndicated crimes, such as scams, online incitement of mass public disorder, and malicious cyber activities, such as phishing and the distribution of malware. We have been monitoring these developments closely and intend to update our suite of legislation to better protect our people.

MHA will, therefore, be introducing the Online Criminal Harms Act later this year. The proposed Online Criminal Harms Act builds on our current laws in three ways.

First, it will expand the scope of regulatory levers that we can apply to online criminal activities. This includes powers to stop or remove online communications that would facilitate crimes in the physical world, such as inciting violence.

Second, it will increase the scope of entities we can act against. It will cover all mediums of online communication through which criminal activities could be conducted.

Third, it will introduce levers that deal more effectively with the nature of online criminal harms. To Mr Derrick Goh's question on how online entities can be involved in prevention and be held more accountable, the new legislation will introduce upstream measures to detect and reduce scams, such as safeguards against inauthentic accounts. This legislation will also apply to other malicious cyber activities, like phishing.

Mr Chairman, MHA continues to monitor closely one specific type of online harm, that of online gambling. As Members know, gambling is prohibited unless licensed or exempted. This applies whether gambling takes place online or physically.

In 2022, we amended our gambling legislation to ensure that our laws are up-to-date and able to address emerging trends. This is especially as the lines between gambling and gaming have become blurred.

Take the example of video games with loot boxes. They may feature a range of virtual items of value, which a player may win with varying probabilities. We allow games with such loot boxes via a class licensing regime, but only if the game fulfils either of two conditions. The loot box within the game must be entirely free of charge to play. Otherwise, the game must not contain monetisation facilities; meaning that players cannot exchange the virtual prizes for real-world payouts, such as money or merchandise.

This is a practical and balanced approach. It ensures we safeguard against gambling inducement, rather than gaming. We will continue to monitor the effectiveness of our gambling legislation and update our regulatory approach where needed.

Beyond legislation, the Home Team must constantly enhance our capabilities to respond to evolving threats. Mr Murali Pillai asked about the returns from our transformation efforts and how we will make future investments.

Over the past five years, an average of about 30% of the Home Team's expenditure has been on capability development, including investing in new technological solutions. We will continue such investments to improve our operations and reduce our reliance on manpower. The results can be seen through how the Home Team has been transforming in four areas: Processes, Platforms, People and Partnerships – four "Ps".

First, our processes. Over the years, we have used automation and biometrics to make our immigration clearance more efficient. Today, Singaporeans who travel through Changi Airport are familiar with the automated immigration clearance gates.

We want to further smoothen clearance processes. Since January 2017, we have implemented 100% automated clearance for all motorcyclists at the land checkpoints. Following successful proof-of-concept trials, ICA and Home Team Science and Technology Agency (HTX) are now working to introduce automated in-car clearance for car travellers. Travellers will remain seated in the car and self-scan their passport and biometrics to verify their identities.

4.15 pm

With automated clearance, we expect overall faster and more secure clearance for car travellers. It also reduces the manpower demand, which can be deployed to meet other needs.

Mr Christopher de Souza asked how technology helped tackle domestic and transnational crime and aid our ground operations.

We have invested in new technology platforms, such as those that improve incident response. In this regard, the use of Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) has been a game changer for the Home Team as it provides us with an eye in the sky that supplement ground officers and ground-based cameras.

For example, SPF deployed such systems for crowd management at events, including heartland celebrations of the National Day Parade and the year-end countdown in 2022.

HTX is further pushing the boundaries by trialling a system that can be operated remotely from a centralised command and control centre. This will allow SPF and SCDF commanders to receive visuals of the scene even before our officers arrive, allowing them to better plan their responses.

Technology has also supported our fight against scams, which are crimes that often have a transnational element. Minister of State Sun will provide more details in her speech.

The third "P" is people. Mr Christopher de Souza rightly pointed out the challenging manpower situation, which is why we have redesigned our training.

For example, our built environment is becoming more complex for our firefighting and rescue operations.

The redeveloped Field Training Area at the Civil Defence Academy will host new infrastructure and stimulators that expand our training scenarios in an area nearly the size of three football fields. This will be ready in end-2023.

The Home Team must also ensure that we have the specialised talent to enable our use of advanced technology, and Mr Murali Pillai asked how HTX has helped.

Beyond consolidating capabilities from across the Home Team, HTX has developed deep expertise in areas, ranging from biometrics to robotics and automation, that support the Home Team's unique needs. The partnerships which HTX has forged, both with local research institutions and foreign counterparts, has enabled us to be at the forefront of new technological developments.

So that it has enough talent, this year, HTX will be ramping up its recruitment and training of fresh science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) graduates from the universities as well as polytechnics. We will also include experienced professionals from the science, engineering and digital technology sectors. The target is to fill a total of 500 positions.

Mr Chairman, our stakeholders and the public are ultimately who we serve. Technology has enabled us to enhance the final "P" – partnerships that are essential to the Home Team.

For example, SCDF's myResponder app has been key to helping to activate Community First Responders (CFRs), who are members of the public, to provide immediate assistance before our officers arrive.

There are more than 130,000 CFRs today. From 2015 to January this year, they have responded to over 3,000 minor fire cases, 6,000 suspected cardiac arrest cases and saved more than 40 lives.

To better equip these responders to respond to minor fires, SCDF will start a new trial to place one fire extinguisher at the ground floor of every two Housing and Development Board (HDB) blocks. When fully implemented over five years, this will benefit 1.1 million HDB households.

Mr Murali also asked about the lessons we have learnt from our transformation journey.

One key lesson is that transformation does not just come about by deploying more technology. We must also streamline our processes, train our officers with the relevant skills and make our partners a part of our transformation.

Mr Chairman, the Home Team transforms its capabilities so that it can continue to respond effectively to a wide range of threats.

Some, like terrorist attacks, we hope to never have to respond to. But we must be prepared nonetheless, and realistic exercises are one way we can achieve this.

In March this year, the Home Team will be conducting Exercise Northstar XI, a major ground exercise which will test multi-agency responses to a terrorist attack on Jurong Island. Exercise Northstar will bring together over 300 participants from agencies, such as SCDF, SPF, Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), JTC and private sector partners. This is a valuable opportunity to validate our interagency responses and capabilities in a realistic setting.

Sir, on a completely different track, let me address Mr Pritam Singh's questions about the selection criteria for new citizens and whether we consider an applicant's extent of integration into Singapore society as the Swiss appear to.

The short answer is yes. We certainly consider the ability of an applicant to integrate in Singapore. But unlike the Swiss system, we do not use a naturalisation test or interviews.

All tests have pitfalls. Sample questions for the Swiss naturalisation test can easily be found online. One can learn the right answers that immigration authorities want to hear and not actually be integrated with locals.

Interviews, if conducted at scale, will also be resource-intensive and uneven in quality. Results are also not conclusive. For example, in 2021, 41% of those with a migrant background felt that they were not perceived as Swiss. This is a survey that was conducted by the Swiss themselves.

Instead, we consider various markers of social integration, such as family ties to Singaporeans, length of residency, whether the applicant studied in our national schools or completed NS. These are assessed together with their economic contributions, qualifications and age.

All applicants must also complete the Singapore Citizenship Journey before being granted citizenship. This programme helps participants better appreciate our history and culture. It was recently refreshed and enhanced, with content co-created with ordinary Singaporeans.

Sir, these measures are by no means perfect, but they have generally served us well. As to Mr Pritam Singh's call to publicise detailed criteria for assessing citizenship applications, let me restate the key reasons not to do so, which remain valid.

First, detailed criteria can be abused to inflate an undeserving applicant's chances of success. There are applicants who submit false documents just to obtain immigration facilities. This problem will be exacerbated if we publish the detailed criteria and applicants know exactly what areas they can game. ICA will have a harder time securing the integrity of our process.

Second, we have unique sensitivities by virtue of history and geography. Today, most of our PRs and new Singapore Citizens (SCs) come from neighbouring regions. This is unsurprising. We do not reveal our detailed criteria or disclose country-specific figures on our PR and SC population, as this information could be misinterpreted or misused by others to stir up bilateral and domestic sensitivities.

Mr Singh spoke about a points-based system and asked why the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) publicises its criteria for the assessment of Employment Passes (EPs) whereas we do not for PRs and SCs.

The considerations for EPs are quite different. They are mainly to supplement our workforce. For most EPs, the stay in Singapore will come to an end. For PRs and SCs, this is far less likely. We must, therefore, also consider how they impact our demographic make-up and social fabric over the long term. Because of the permanent nature of PR and SC facilities, the need to guard against gaming is also greater. Mr Chairman, allow me now to speak in Mandarin.

(In Mandarin): [Please refer to [Vernacular Speech](#) on Pg 244.] Mr Chairman, Singapore remains one of the safest countries in the world, in large part because the public has placed a high level of trust and confidence in the Home Team, and do their part to uphold law and order.

But we cannot take our peaceful state of affairs for granted. The Home Team must anticipate and deal with emerging and evolving threats. We continue to put in place new laws and policies to improve Singapore's safety and security.

One such area is our approach towards online harms. We have witnessed the online medium increasingly being used to facilitate crimes, such as large-scale scam operations and malicious cyber activities.

Therefore, later this year, MHA will introduce the Online Criminal Harms Act. This will build on our existing laws and strengthen our ability to deal with online criminal activities. This includes powers to stop or remove online communications that facilitate crimes in the physical world, such as inciting violence.

The Home Team will also continue to enhance our capabilities and partner the public to keep Singapore safe.

For example, there are more than 130,000 CFRs today, who are members of the public that can provide immediate assistance to minor fire and cardiac arrest cases before our officers arrive.

To better equip CFRs to respond to minor fires, SCDF will be embarking on a new trial to place one fire extinguisher at the ground floor of every two HDB blocks. When fully implemented over five years, this will benefit 1.1 million HDB households.

Mr Chairman, Singapore's success in meeting safety and security threats relies on the collective effort of the Home Team and the public. The Home Team will continue to do our utmost to live up to the trust and confidence Singaporeans have placed in us, so that Singapore will remain a safe and secure home for all of us.

The Chairman: Minister of State Muhammad Faishal.

The Minister of State for Home Affairs (Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim): Mr Chairman, the Home Team continues to do well in keeping our streets safe. However, terrorism poses a serious threat to our security.

Mr Christopher de Souza asked about efforts to combat terrorism.

International cooperation is critical to tackling terrorism and terrorism financing. We work closely with overseas counterparts to share intelligence on potential terror threats and conduct joint operations. We will continue to enhance collaboration through international platforms, such as the Financial Action Task Force and INTERPOL.

Within Singapore, we have implemented structures and processes to take swift action against terrorism financing. This includes the Anti-Money Laundering and Countering the Financing of Terrorism Steering Committee, which coordinates efforts amongst Government agencies.

We also work closely with private sector partners under the Countering the Financing of Terrorism Operational Group. This workgroup facilitates round-the-clock investigative collaboration, allowing us to investigate terrorism financing expeditiously.

Youth radicalisation cases have increased significantly in recent years. From 2002 to 2014, only two youths aged 20 were dealt with under the ISA for terrorism-related activities. Since 2015, ISA orders were issued to 11 self-radicalised youths aged 20 and below.

Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim asked about measures to address youth radicalisation. The ISD has intensified its outreach. In 2022, ISD organised close to 70 counter-terrorism or radicalisation outreach events in schools and Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs) targeting students and educators. This includes workshops to train school counsellors to identify signs of radicalisation and on early intervention.

The upcoming Online Criminal Harms Act announced by the Second Minister earlier will also give us powers to direct takedowns of online content facilitating radicalisation. As the threat of terrorism in Singapore remains high, we will continue to enhance our operational capabilities and expand our outreach.

4.30 pm

I will now address cuts on drugs. Globally, drug use continues to rise, posing challenges to keeping Singapore drug-free. Locally, while the drug situation remains under control, we are concerned with drug abuse amongst youths. While most youths support a tough stance against drugs, some younger Singaporeans take a more permissive attitude, especially towards cannabis.

Mr Gan Thiam Poh asked how we are preventing drug abuse. We will continue to strengthen our harm prevention approach to combat drug abuse. Our first line of defence against drugs is a well-informed public. Mr Christopher de Souza and Mr Derrick Goh asked about preventive drug education (PDE) for youths.

The CNB will expand PDE efforts in schools. Secondary schools which did not do a PDE engagement in the last two years, will conduct at least one engagement in 2023. Moving forward, CNB is working with the Ministry of Education (MOE) to ensure all primary and secondary schools conduct at least one PDE programme annually.

With TikTok becoming increasingly popular amongst youths, CNB launched its TikTok account last year, which regularly posts short videos of our drug enforcement efforts. Mr Christopher de Souza asked about sensitising the public to the threat of drug liberalisation globally. CNB highlights trends of concern in the global drug situation through various communication channels.

As part of the #CNBPerspectives Series launched in 2022, CNB took to Facebook and Instagram to share worrying trends from the World Drug Report 2022. In fact, I also posted things relating to this to support their effort. These include the increase of cannabis-use disorders in jurisdictions which legalise cannabis for non-medical use. We also educate our anti-drug abuse advocates about the increasingly permissive views other countries have towards drugs and train them to speak up against drugs.

The second pillar of our anti-drug strategy is tough laws and robust enforcement. To deter Singaporeans and PRs from abusing drugs overseas, CNB has stepped up enforcement at the checkpoints with the deployment of Saliva Test Kits from January this year. These kits, like the one I am holding here – they are light and compact. They offer a more efficient way to detect drug abusers at the checkpoints.

This month, CNB and Police started trialling joint roadblock operations to detect drug abusers. Saliva Test Kits will also be used. Mr Derrick Goh asked about enforcement against New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) and vaping. The speed and breadth at which NPS variants have appeared have often outpaced authorities' ability to control them.

On 24 February, MHA introduced a Bill to amend the Misuse of Drugs Act to control psychoactive substances based on their capacity to produce psychoactive effects rather than their chemical structure alone. This will empower CNB to take swift enforcement actions against illicit activities involving NPS. Enforcement against vaping will be addressed at the Ministry of Health (MOH)'s COS.

The third pillar of our anti-drug strategy is enhancing rehabilitation. Mr Raj Joshua Thomas asked about efforts to reduce drug recidivism. CNB recently reviewed its drug supervision regime and has deployed suitable officers to take on specialist roles in supervision to enhance the rehabilitation process.

As I had announced last year, CNB has been piloting Community Supervision Sessions, in short, CoSS, since 2019, where supervision officers help supervisees address financial, housing and other rehabilitation needs.

A supervisee who has benefited from CoSS is 46-year-old Mr Aidil. After his release from the Drug Rehabilitation Centre (DRC) in 2021, Aidil was afraid of not being able to find a suitable job. Through CoSS sessions, Aidil was given career guidance and advice on his rehabilitation needs by his supervision officer. With this support, Aidil landed a part-time job within five months of his release.

As the pilot has shown good results, I am pleased to announce that CoSS will be progressively rolled out to all supervisees by June this year.

Mr Murali Pillai asked about support for desistors with drug-abusing pasts. The SPS has enhanced its Psychology-based Correctional Programmes (PCPs) to be more targeted for repeated drug abusers during their in-care period. These PCPs will cater more time to address negative attitudes and improve emotional regulation, as both factors contribute to repeated drug use.

Mr Murali Pillai, Mr Christopher de Souza, Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim and Mr Raj Joshua Thomas asked about efforts to reduce recidivism, and Mr Patrick Tay and Dr Tan Wu Meng asked about improving the employability of ex-offenders.

Singapore's two-year recidivism rate is low and stable at around 20% for the 2020 release cohort. Our five-year rate is higher, at between 40% and 43%. Reducing long-term recidivism will not be easy. We must work with community partners to offer offenders and drug abusers an ecosystem of support, starting from when they enter our prisons and DRCs, and continuing to do so after their release. Let me share our strategy to support them.

First, by enhancing their skills and employment outcomes. Gainful employment allows ex-offenders to be financially independent and reduces risks of re-offending. In 2023, SPS and YRSG will continue to work with partners to help ex-offenders upskill and boost their longer-term career progression.

In collaboration with the Institute of Technical Education (ITE), SPS has set up education hubs to enrol more inmate students. In 2023, SPS will work with ITE to run more short courses, such as the Computer Maintenance course, following positive reviews.

I am pleased to announce that YRSG is launching the YR Sandbox initiative to develop new career options in emerging sectors. YRSG will work with industry partners to hire releasing inmates and provide on-the-job training or work-study programmes. Potential sectors include skilled sectors like Digital, Built Environment and Agri-Tech.

This new initiative complements TAP & Grow – TAP meaning "Train and Place". This scheme provides inmates with industry training in prison and potential job placement with a partner employer. TAP & Grow has been launched in the Precision Engineering, Media and Logistics and Wholesale sectors. As of 2022, a total of 422 inmates have completed the training programmes.

In 2023, YRSG will expand TAP & Grow to Food Services, which we expect to benefit up to 700 inmates and ex-offenders annually.

Mr Murali Pillai asked about the UEC. It will provide time-limited wage offsets to encourage employers to hire ex-offenders. More will be announced at MOM's COS. Currently, about two-thirds of ex-offenders secure employment within six months of release. We hope to improve this and will raise awareness of the UEC and other available support amongst employers.

Dr Tan Wu Meng asked about recognition for inclusive employers. In 2022, over 200 employers, community partners, ex-offenders and volunteers were recognised for their contributions towards second chances through the Yellow Ribbon Awards.

Sir, I would like to express my appreciation for NTUC in joining SPS and YRSG in engaging with inmates and ex-offenders to understand their concerns, priorities and aspirations through the #EveryWorkerMatters conversation.

Second, by strengthening pro-social support in the community. The community, including ex-offenders themselves and their family plays a critical role. Mr Christopher de Souza asked about enhancing post-release mentorship.

I am pleased to announce that SPS has piloted a new scheme for volunteers to assist in the case management of selected supervisees emplaced on Community-Based Programmes (CBPs). Volunteer Case Officers will guide the supervisees towards a pro-social life during and beyond the CBP.

SPS is working with community partners to launch the Desistor Network in April this year. Desistors who have stayed clear of crime and drugs will serve as mentors to recently released ex-offenders. This will also strengthen desistors' sense of self as contributing members of the community.

Mr Raj Joshua Thomas asked about follow-ups from the CARE Network Summit 2022 and expanding YRSG's role. YRSG will continue to work closely with SPS and community partners via the CARE Network to tackle long-term recidivism. From 2023, the CARE Network will tap on the Desistor Network to co-opt desistors in planning and conducting programmes for ex-offenders.

Family support is also critical. Mr Murali Pillai asked about supporting offenders to mend family ties. To aid in their family reintegration, SPS works with community partners to provide family programmes to inmates, and befriending and other pro-social support to ex-offenders after release.

Mr Christopher de Souza and Mr Raj Joshua Thomas asked about creating greater acceptance for ex-offenders and recruiting more volunteers to help with rehabilitation.

The Yellow Ribbon Project's (YRP) outreach has generated high awareness and support. Based on a 2022 survey, about 91% of respondents were aware of YRP's objectives, rehabilitation challenges faced by ex-offenders and the need to reduce stigma towards them. SPS and YRSG have expanded roles and training for volunteers in areas of in-care and aftercare, including support for families. Collectively, SPS and YRSG have more than 4,000 volunteers supporting rehabilitation.

In 2023, YRSG will focus on showcasing inmates and ex-offenders' talents and contributions to reiterate that ex-offenders can contribute to society.

Mr Murali Pillai asked about allowing desistors to perform at National Day Parades (NDPs). We have been providing desistors with opportunities to showcase their talent at public events. The Yellow Ribbon Performing Arts Centre Alumni Band had performed at Red Dot August at the Esplanade for the past three years. We will explore more opportunities.

Mr Raj Joshua Thomas asked about alleviating the impact of incarceration on one's family. Yellow Ribbon Community Project (YRCP) grassroots volunteers have engaged over 19,000 families since 2010, linking them to community assistance and ensuring their well-being. In 2023, we will strengthen support for inmates' families by collaborating with more community resources, such as religious organisations, Social Service Offices (SSOs) and Family Service Centres (FSCs).

Mr Patrick Tay asked for a review of the Registration of Criminals Act on spent offences. From time to time, MHA reviews the spent regime for criminal records. In our last review in 2021, we assessed that the existing regime continues to be appropriate to facilitate the reintegration of ex-offenders, in particular those who committed minor crimes. This position took into consideration the many initiatives to facilitate reintegration and reduce long-term recidivism.

Mr Patrick Tay asked about support for female ex-offenders. In September 2022, SPS set up a secular all-women halfway house, named Rise Above Halfway House (RAHWH). RAHWH provides gender-responsive interventions and facilitates social reintegration for the residents. As of February 2023, 31 female offenders have been emplaced to RAHWH. We will continue to support female ex-offenders and facilitate their reintegration.

4.45 pm

Next, Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim asked about collaboration with the Malay/Muslim community to better support inmates and ex-offenders. I will now speak in Malay about our community's crucial role.

(In Malay): [Please refer to [Vernacular Speech](#) on Pg 245.] Sir, many Malay/Muslim Organisations (MMOs) have stepped forward to work with SPS and CNB to prevent offending and re-offending by providing support to inmates, ex-offenders, and their family from incarceration to post-release. These include AMP, FITRAH, Jamiyah, PERGAS, PPIS, PERTAPIS, Yayasan MENDAKI and a number of mosques.

Let me share some examples of how these MMOs have stepped forward to offer assistance.

FITRAH has developed a values-centric in-care religious programme for inmates and prepares Friday Prayer sermons that are contextualised to their rehabilitation needs.

FITRAH has galvanised all 71 mosques to support inmates, ex-offenders and their family, beyond zakat assistance. Today, all mosques are familiar with FITRAH's work and refer them to FITRAH for support, such as befriending.

Many MMOs have joined Singapore's efforts in supporting rehabilitation. MHA recognises that there is value in coordinating all these efforts to create greater synergy. In November 2021, we launched the MMO Rehabilitation Network, which brings together 26 MMOs and all eleven M³@Towns.

Since its launch, many collaborations have been forged. For example, FITRAH has collaborated with New Life Stories to develop a referral system where they can tap on each other's expertise. Jamiyah Halfway House has collaborated with the West Mosque Cluster to further support the reintegration of its residents.

Supporting inmates, ex-offenders and their family is an endeavour that cannot be undertaken by the Home Team alone. I am thankful to MMOs for working closely with us to uplift and make a difference to the lives of our beneficiaries.

Your efforts and contributions have helped to keep the recidivism rates low and the number of new drug abusers stable. Keep up the good work!

(In English): Sir, in conclusion, thanks to our Home Team Officers, Singapore remains safe and secure. We will continue to work with our community partners to combat terrorism, prevent drug abuse and support our inmates and ex-offenders.

The Chairman: Minister of State Sun Xueling.

The Minister of State for Home Affairs (Ms Sun Xueling): Mr Chairman, we have a war against scams on our hands. In 2022, we saw 31,728 scam cases, a 32.6% increase from 2021. More than \$660 million was lost, 4.5% higher than 2021.

Mr Sitoh Yin Pin asked for an update on the Government's efforts to combat scams. I chair the Inter-Ministry Committee on Scams, which leads a multi-agency effort to develop a systems wide collective shield to protect us from scams. We deploy a multi-layered defence strategy against scams: first, we endeavour to block scam calls, SMSes, online listings and websites; second, we secure Government services and banking channels; third, we strengthen our enforcement capabilities; and lastly, we strengthen our laws.

Mr Christopher de Souza and Mr Vikram Nair asked how the Government partners industry and people sector stakeholders to combat scams. Mr Christopher de Souza asked about the use of technology in our efforts to fight scams.

The Home Team has established partnerships across Government, private and people sectors, using technology to aid our efforts.

For calls, SPF works closely with local telecommunication companies to terminate mobile lines used for scams. In 2022, more than 6,500 such mobile lines were terminated. The SPF also engaged WhatsApp on more than 22,800 WhatsApp lines believed to be used in scams in 2022.

For SMSes, the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) mandated SMS Sender ID registration from January 2023 and implemented anti-scam filters to detect potential scam SMSes. Under the Sender ID regime, all non-registered senders are flagged as "Likely-SCAM". After a transition period, SMSes carrying unregistered Sender IDs will be blocked upfront.

To address scams arising from international numbers, IMDA is exploring offering the option to members of the public to not to receive international calls and SMSes. More details will be released when ready.

For online listings, SPF partners social media companies and e-marketplaces to remove suspicious accounts and advertisements. In 2022, more than 3,100 accounts and advertisements suspected of involvement in scams were removed.

For websites, SPF uses analytic tools to identify and block scam websites, by detecting tell-tale characteristics. In 2022, about 20,000 scam websites were blocked.

The Home Team also works with stakeholders to secure Government services and banking channels, so scammers cannot exploit system vulnerabilities.

We have onboarded all Government agencies onto the SMS Sender ID registry, making Government agencies harder to spoof. We are considering measures that allow the verification of incoming calls from Government officials.

The SPF also deepened their partnership with the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) and domestic banks to flag and freeze suspicious accounts. Over the past year, MAS worked with the Association of Banks in Singapore, or ABS in short, on the following measures: (a) a cooling-off period for provisioning new digital tokens; (b) removing clickable links from official emails and SMSes; (c) lowering default transaction limits; and (d) an emergency self-service "kill switch", allowing customers to suspend their accounts quickly if compromised.

The MAS and the ABS are exploring a "money lock" solution, which enables customers to "lock up" a designated sum in their bank accounts. This reduces the amount that could potentially be lost to scams via digital transfers.

Mr Derrick Goh spoke about the increased use of foreign payment gateways. As more foreign gateways open up, we are also working with MAS to review and enhance the suite of anti-scam measures to mitigate the risk of these channels being used for illicit purposes.

Mr Chairman, no defence is impenetrable. Some scams will succeed. For example, investment scams and job scams, which contributed to the bulk of monies lost to scams in Singapore, are very hard to tackle. We have, thus, strengthened our enforcement capabilities, to minimise the number of victims and amounts lost to scammers.

The Anti-Scam Command was formed last year to consolidate expertise in combatting scams across the SPF. In 2022, 25 islandwide anti-scam enforcement operations led to over 8,000 money mules and scammers being investigated.

Mr Vikram Nair asked about our collaborations with foreign law enforcement authorities to address the transnational nature of scams. The SPF works closely with their foreign counterparts to exchange information and conduct joint operations. In 2022, this led to the successful take-down of 13 syndicates. The SPF arrested more than 70 people based overseas, who were responsible for more than 280 scam cases.

Mr Christopher de Souza also asked about MHA's plans to reduce the prevalence of money mules. We intend to tighten the law against those who facilitate the movement of scam proceeds.

Currently, the vast majority of money mule investigations do not result in prosecution. Based on current laws, we need to prove that the money mule knew that the monies he was handling were linked to criminal activity. We will amend the Corruption, Drug Trafficking and Other Serious Crimes (Confiscation of Benefits) Act, or CDSA, to prescribe specific conduct for which we can hold mules criminally liable.

MHA is also working with SNDGO on legislative amendments to the Penal Code to curb abuse of Singpass credentials as a vector to perpetrate scams.

Given the evolving landscape of scams, new forms of scams will emerge. Mr Christopher de Souza asked about the processes in place to inform and activate stakeholders to address the latest scams.

Once we are aware of an emergent scam, the SPF works with the media and other stakeholders to publicise information on it so that the public can be put on guard. The SPF also taps on its partnerships with sectoral stakeholders to swiftly activate a multi-layered defence, which we adapt as the scam evolves.

The best defence against scams is a vigilant and discerning public. To defend ourselves and our loved ones, we need to move beyond awareness, to mobilise every citizen to take action against scams.

Mr Christopher de Souza asked how the Government is keeping up our public education efforts to prevent scams. In January this year, we launched a new national anti-scam campaign with the tagline "I can ACT against scams" as our rallying call.

ACT is an acronym for three key actions that each of us can take to keep ourselves safe from scams. "A" stands for Adding security features, such as installing the ScamShield app on mobile devices. "C" stands for Checking for scam signs and verifying with official sources. "T" stands for Telling authorities, family and friends about scams.

We will be launching the Scam Public Education Office later this year to drive our collective efforts with community partners and expand our outreach on scams, including (a) collaborating with National Crime Prevention Council (NCPC) to create and curate anti-scam public education content at the national level; and (b) working with private sector and community agencies to tailor our anti-scam public education efforts for different population segments.

In September 2022, we expanded the ScamShield app to Android device users. ScamShield protects users by blocking calls from known scam numbers and filtering out potential scam SMSes. It also allows users to report scam calls and scam SMSes. We are working closely with GovTech to roll out ScamShield 2.0, which will include a WhatsApp chatbot for the public to report scam messages.

I encourage all citizens to download and use the ScamShield app. By playing your part in reporting scam calls, SMSes, and WhatsApp messages, you protect others by enabling the Police to detect scam messages and fraudulent WhatsApp accounts much more quickly and to put these scam messages on a blacklist.

Mr Derrick Goh spoke about potential levers to ensure co-operation and accountability with stakeholders. Last year, we launched the E-commerce Marketplace Transaction Safety Ratings (TSR), a consumer advisory that reviews and tracks the transaction safety of major e-commerce marketplaces based on specific metrics. The TSR encourages marketplaces to deter and detect scams committed on their platforms. It allows consumers to make informed decisions on where to do their online shopping safely. We will be refreshing the platform ratings in the TSR in April.

Mr Murali Pillai referred to his previous suggestion for SPF to publish the amounts seized and returned to victims. The SPF does not actively track the cumulative dollar value of assets recovered and the amount returned to victims. The seizure of \$172.8 million in assets that Mr Pillai referred to, was a statistic quoted from INTERPOL's article, about a global INTERPOL operation that Singapore participated in.

5.00 pm

Beyond being aware and acting against scams, we need to educate the public on the consequences of engaging in scam activities. Mr Derrick Goh asked about our efforts and partnerships to address the increase in youths involved with scams and to encourage positive youth development.

A key initiative for youths is the biannual Delta League, run by SPF and NCPC. Youth participants engage in sports and participate in crime prevention activities, which enhance their awareness of the consequences of crime. More than 1,200 youths participated in the most recent Delta League which engaged participants in activities that educated them on scams.

SPF also issues mid-year and year-end advisories to students and parents through schools to remind students to steer clear of crime, including being alert against attempts to trick them into becoming money mules. The SPF will continue to work with its stakeholders to promote a sense of social responsibility among our youths.

Dr Shahira Abdullah suggested having a one-stop unit to assist scam victims and address their financial and emotional needs.

The Victim Care Cadre programme under the SPF provides support to crime victims. Where needed, the Police activate volunteer Victim Care Officers, or VCOs, who work with the Police Psychological Services Department to provide psychological first aid. Where necessary, the VCOs will also direct victims to available community and professional resources for longer-term psychological support and/or financial support. This includes Family Service Centres, Samaritans of Singapore and the hospitals.

Dr Shahira Abdullah spoke about disabled scam victims, and deaf persons in particular, getting timely help. Crime victims have multiple avenues for reporting, including online. If a report is lodged in person, the Police buildings are designed to be accessible for persons with disabilities. And if needed, sign language interpreters will be engaged to assist.

I will now address a question on the working hours of security officers. Mr Raj Joshua Thomas asked if the Government would take the lead to regularise their hours, by requiring shorter shift hours for all Government security contracts.

Since 2020, it has been mandatory for public agencies to adopt outcome-based contracts for procuring security services. New tenders are generally required to specify outcomes, rather than dictate a fixed headcount or shift hours. This allows security agencies to optimise security solutions that integrate manpower, technology and processes, giving them the flexibility to decide on the duration of each security officer's shift. The Government will continue working with tripartite partners to further improve the working conditions of security officers.

Mr Chairman, kindly allow me to say a few words in Mandarin.

(In Mandarin): [Please refer to [Vernacular Speech](#) on Pg 246.] We are fighting a war against scams. Scammers are vicious and cunning. They prey on our natural human needs and motivation, such as desire for companionship or additional income to support our families.

Scammers often exploit our individual characteristics. For example, compliant residents may be targeted by scammers impersonating Government agents. The scammers may also target those who are impulsive in nature and create an artificial sense of urgency and require the victims to transfer money and provide information promptly.

Scammed victims are often hurt more than just financially. They also suffer emotionally as well as mentally. In cases of love scams or fake friend calls, scammers normally take time to cultivate a close relationship with the victim, gaining their trust before draining their bank accounts. These victims not only suffer financial losses, but also often feel guilty or betrayed. They are hurt deeply emotionally and may even have difficulties to trust others in future.

As with modern military weapons, the design of scams takes the form of innovative disguises meant to target our needs and desires. The traps they set up are everywhere, and every day, we find ourselves barraged by various scams.

I would like to emphasise here that everyone could encounter scammers, and everyone can be scammed. We must remain vigilant and never let our guard down.

(In English): Mr Chairman, everyone has a part to play to keep Singapore safe and secure. While the Government will step up measures to protect us against scams, we need to remain alert and ready to keep ourselves and our loved ones safe. Beyond exercising individual responsibility, let us also look out for and support others in our community, to strengthen our collective resilience. Together, we will be able to fight the war against scams.

The Chairman: Leader of the Opposition.

Mr Pritam Singh: Thank you, Mdm Chair. Just some clarification questions for Minister pertaining to my cut on new citizen selection which would come under the ambit of the ICA.

The first clarification I have is the point about sensitivities. I think Minister shared that countries-specific information is not put out because it can be misinterpreted, I believe that is what the Minister said. I stand corrected if that is incorrect.

My point is, based on the latest Census, and the Census before that, in 10-year intervals, information on the place of birth of PRs and citizens are actually provided in 10-yearly intervals. So, the countries that are covered – Malaysia, China, India, Indonesia, Europe, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and other Asian countries – this information that is already provided. So, what specific sensitivities is the Minister referring to when the Minister says that revealing countries-specific information could be misinterpreted?

The second question has to do with my point in the cut, I do not believe Minister addressed it. It has to do with English as a criterion for citizenship selection because of its utility as a language for better integration between Singaporeans and new citizens. Can the Minister confirm whether this is part of the process in assessing individuals for citizenship?

My third clarification is on the refreshed Singapore Citizenship journey that Minister spoke of. Very recently, the former Minister for Foreign Affairs in Singapore, Mr George Yeo, spoke of suggestion of new citizens being approved by a jury of ordinary Singaporeans and these are his comments:

"We are completely self-interested. So, we bring in clever people, wealthy people, connected people. But some of them when they come in, they think they are a blessing to Singaporeans and act as if we should be pleased that they are here. I met some of them when I was a Member of Parliament. They talk as if we owe them. Now, this psychology is very important that Singaporeans do not feel that the foreigners whom we bring in are lording over them and looking down on them and misbehaving."

In this regard, Minister said that the content of the refreshed —

The Chairman: Mr Singh, could you get to your question?

Mr Pritam Singh: Yes, I am putting my question across now, Mdm Chair. And in this context, with regard to the refreshed Singapore Citizenship journey, Minister shared that the content was co-created with Singaporeans. Can I just confirm with the Minister, which aspect of the content is she referring to?

Mrs Josephine Teo: Mdm Chair, I thank the Leader of the Opposition for his questions. He asked what aspects of our immigration information is not broken down by specific countries. And I believe if you look at the reports to do with annual awards of Permanent Residency and Singapore Citizenship, we speak of the regions from which the new citizens, as well as the new PRs, originate from.

On the second question that he asked for a clarification on, Mdm Chair, if I may ask the Leader of the Opposition: is he advocating that a test of English should be applied before someone can be considered for permanent residency and citizenship? Is he advocating a position, or he is merely asking a question?

Mr Pritam Singh: Mdm Chair, I thank the Minister for that. I believe it would be helpful, so I would advocate for it. And I used the peg of the findings of the latest Census report which spoke of English and how commonly it is spoken in Singapore, comparing 2020 to 2010, and it is much more widely spoken today. So, the peg that I am coming in from is its utility as a tool to improve integration between Singaporeans and new citizens.

So, in that regard, given the new information that we have, I believe it could be a helpful tool to improve integration.

Just on the first clarification that Minister provided, I do not think Minister answered the question. I am suggesting that those countries, the information which shows where someone was born is actually already provided in 10-year Census. So, what sensitivities apply with regard to not wanting to release that information on a yearly basis, when I see it releases its information on PRs and citizenships awarded that year?

Mrs Josephine Teo: I think we have said this on previous occasions. I think you can imagine the scenario if you publish this information on such a current basis, how this information can be misinterpreted and can also be used to suggest that we are friendly or not as friendly to certain nationalities, and even to certain ethnicities. I do not have anything new to add to the previous explanations that had been provided.

On Mr Singh's advocacy of us using English, perhaps, as a test of the ability of a new citizen or PR to integrate, I must admit to being quite surprised by his position, the reason being that, firstly, one can imagine that for most applicants to permanent residency and citizenship if they have been in Singapore for a number of years, particularly if they had worked here, a facility with English is not surprising. And I would think a test need not be applied.

For those who perhaps do not have the facility with English and/or cannot communicate easily in English, I think from our ground interactions, it is also quite clear who these individuals are likely to be. They are likely to be spouses of citizens or other PRs and have come from the same country of origin and unless we are saying that we, therefore, do not welcome such foreign spouses, then I am not sure to what extent a test of English that could be applied to prevent them from being considered would be helpful.

Thirdly, on the ground, every day we meet with residents who cannot speak a word of English. I do not think anyone would suggest that they are any less integrated to Singapore society. As to some of the comments he made about applicants who may lord it over Singaporeans and so on, I am not sure what the question is, perhaps I could ask him to repeat it.

The Chairman: Mr Singh, please keep it succinct so that others will have a chance to also ask their clarifications.

5.15 pm

Mr Pritam Singh: Yes, Mdm Chair. The question was with regard to the point that Minister made in her speech about the refreshed Singapore Citizenship Journey. And she mentioned that the content was co-created with citizens. So, I have asked what aspect of the content was co-created by citizens.

Mrs Josephine Teo: I do not have the details of those content. But if the Leader of the Opposition is interested, we could share it with them. The Singapore Citizenship Journey includes materials that are shared with the applicants to our citizenship. And they can look at these materials in order to be more familiar with Singapore history and culture. Those probably have involved other citizens in terms of their development. And there is also, if I recall correctly, a component of the Singapore Citizenship Journey that takes these applicants to various locations. Those are materials that we can provide to you.

The Chairman: Mr Christopher de Souza.

Mr Christopher de Souza: Thank you, Chair, I have three clarifications. One on scams, one on cannabis and one on technology.

My experience on the ground is, in terms of scams, it happens very, very quickly. Within a span of three weeks, I have had two separate families come and see me. One had lost \$280,000 and one having lost \$80,000. And what they shared with me is that, through many money mule accounts in Singapore, money is transferred from account to account, and then transferred out. And while they are interested in prosecution of those involved in this, they are most concerned with the recovery of the money.

That is the sentiment on the ground. My humble and respectful suggestion is that we build in a "kill switch" that would just stop the flow of money from one account to the next account, prior to it leaving our shores. So, would that be considered or enhanced?

The second point is about cannabis. I listened very carefully to the Minister of State Faishal's response, and I thank him for that. Would it be useful to share with the public the long-term societal harm of recreational cannabis use? And I use Washington state is a good starting point. I am not saying it has worked well or negatively there, but it is the 10th year anniversary of Washington state's legalising recreational use of marijuana. I think it did so in December 2012.

So, if we can have some statistical, empirical, evidential data on what the societal effect, the effects on society are – employability, mental health, family relationships, long term – then, we will be on firmer standing on our zero-tolerance to drugs.

The Chairman: Mr de Souza, can you ask your clarifications?

Mr Christopher de Souza: Yes, Madam. Third point is technology. I thank Minister Mrs Josephine Teo for her explanation on how we are using drones and unmanned surveillance equipment. My humble suggestion is that that does not substitute the need for good human ground judgement, in order to know how to prevent crime and also disperse crowds. I am speaking up very much in favour of the retention of best-in-class, world-class officers on the ground to do their job, and not an over-reliance on technology. Thank you, Chair, for your indulgence.

Ms Sun Xueling: I thank the Member Mr Christopher de Souza on his first question regarding scams. Indeed, we have a "kill switch", which I had mentioned in my main reply. This emergency self-service "kill switch" allows customers to suspend their accounts quickly, if compromised. But this is their own account. As noted by Mr Christopher de Souza, what happens often is that the original sum of monies from the customer's bank account gets dismantled, dispersed and then, goes through the banking system into various other bank accounts not owned by them. So, while the bank account of the original bank account holder – the victim – has activated the "kill switch" for his or her own account, it has not stopped the monies from being transferred to other accounts.

And that is why what we intend to do with the money mules is an important step, because we want to prevent these money mules from setting up or using multiple bank accounts to allow the scam proceeds to filter through the system. We have also co-located the seven major retail banks together at Anti-Scam Command, so that they can coordinate their efforts.

I would like to give an example of one case I looked at. There was one victim. And guess how many accounts the original sum of monies went through? Eighty-nine bank accounts. That was how quickly bank accounts were set up and the monies is dispersed through the banking system. And that is why it is important that we work with the various retail banks to have the retail banks co-located together, so that we can share information quickly and for the banks to quickly trace the monies and close off those bank accounts and stop the monies from moving through the banking system, and then, out of Singapore, whereby it is then out of our jurisdiction.

Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim: Madam, I thank the Member, Mr Christopher de Souza, for the suggestion. Indeed, we have been studying the effects and we also have been sharing some of these through our various platforms, including our #CNB Perspective Series. And essentially, if you look, for example, in the US, for those jurisdictions where cannabis is legalised, you see that the prevalence of cannabis consumption is significantly higher in these states, compared to the overall average. So, that is one.

Another part is, we can also see the more adverse effects, in terms of the medical and health perspective, and also the number of emergency visits and treatments that have been required.

For example, in California, after the opening of the retail sales market for cannabis, emergency visits and admissions related to any cannabis use increased by 56% from 2016 to 2019. These are things that we continue to follow because we are convinced of the harmful effects of drugs, including cannabis, and we want to share a lot more of these with our people.

In fact, in the coming months, I am going to share – through my social media platforms – some of the perspectives that we know, that we have learnt from our counterparts overseas, who may have a different stance on drugs. We will do that. And I thank the Member for believing in this; and we really, really appreciate your support.

Mrs Josephine Teo: Mdm Chair, I thank Mr Christopher de Souza for reaffirming the importance of our officers and their skills level, even as we deploy more technology in carrying out our mission. Let me assure him that the points that he made are definitely not lost on us. Ultimately, we will still need officers who have the judgement. We need officers who understand our cultural context and our operating conditions, in order that they will be able to put the technologies to good use.

Even in the way we develop the technologies, we need human talent. I mentioned in my speech earlier that HTX intends to fill something like 500 positions for this year alone. And if you compare it to the size of HTX today, which is about 1,500, that is still a 25% increase simply to build the capabilities to use technology more effectively.

So, it is a question of where we are deploying our talent resources in the sense of using technology as a force multiplier. That is still the approach that we hope to take in order to serve Singaporeans better, in order to protect Singaporeans through the use of technology in the appropriate way and also to do so in such a manner as not to overly strain our resources.

The Chairman: Mr Gan Thiam Poh.

Mr Gan Thiam Poh: Mdm Chair, I just overheard about the saliva test kit. Can the Minister of State share more about it. I find it quite interesting. It is very welcomed.

Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim: I have tried it. [*Laughter.*] Essentially, if you look at it, drugs in the body can enter oral fluid, the saliva, through passive diffusion from blood or may be deposited in the oral cavity during oral, smoke or intranasal administration. So, indeed, drug metabolites also can be detected in saliva. That is one.

Then, the saliva test, I have shown Members earlier: you need to swab a person's tongue, using the test kit to obtain minute sample of saliva. The test kit subsequently will check the saliva for controlled drugs and produces results in about eight to 10 minutes. So, it is quite fast. It is similar to the COVID-19 test kits where the test kit will produce red lines if particular drugs are present. So, it is quick, efficient, fast.

Nevertheless, we will also have a double check. That means, if we find that there are some test results which are positive, we will bring them back to do further testing.

The Chairman: Mr Raj Joshua Thomas.

Mr Raj Joshua Thomas: Thank you, Mdm Chair. I thank the Minister of State for her response on my question of regularising security officers' working hours. And I understand her response is that the Government has implemented security outcome-based contracts for all of their security contracts.

My clarification is whether, in precisely these security outcome-based contracts, whether the Government can implement higher weightage for bid proposals that propose shorter working hours for security officers for these two reasons: first, it has been shown that when security officers work shorter hours, they are operationally more effective, which is an outcome in and of itself; and the second is to support the overall effort to better the working conditions of our outsourced workers.

Ms Sun Xueling: I thank the Member for his question. We share the same sentiment. We want to improve the working hours, the working conditions for our security officers.

So, what we are trying to do now is that we want to work with stakeholders to look at outcome-based driven approaches and we do know that the industry actually needs time to also develop expertise, because we are talking about a better match between manpower with technology, and also with the solutions that are available.

We will take into account the suggestion that the Member has made. We will go back and look into it and see how the Government agencies can further drive initiatives on this front.

The Chairman: Mr Christopher de Souza.

Mr Christopher de Souza: Thank you, Madam. I thank Minister of State Sun for the response and for clarifying that there is a "kill switch" option on the part of the consumer. May I humbly propose that the "kill switch" option or power, also be bestowed on the banks? Because, in the example that Minister of State Sun provided, which is consistent with the example that was given to me by the residents who spoke with me, was that: from one account, it goes to six accounts, it goes to 36 accounts and carries on.

5.30 pm

So, if that algorithm or pattern is recognised by the bank internally, then my humble question is, ought not the bank then be given the power to "kill switch" the transmission of monies from accounts to accounts, without the incumbency being on the consumer, on the customer, but the bank itself. Could that be considered?

Ms Sun Xueling: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. As I mentioned, the seven major retail banks are co-located with each other and the sole purpose is to be able to exchange information quickly, once they are aware that a scam has occurred, that the victim has lost money. The seven major retail banks are working closely together, together with the SPF, to provide standby services 24/7 and they aim to freeze accounts within an hour. So, we definitely try to do so.

But the reason I use the example was to demonstrate the complexity. Because of the proliferation of the number of bank accounts that are being created by money mules who are negligent in the way they have given up control of their bank accounts or some have given up their Singpass IDs to allow others to set up bank accounts, many of these bank accounts are being used to launder these proceeds. And the banks do need time to be able to trace the monies and activate the "kill switch", as the Member also said.

This is something that the banks are working on. The banks are working closely with the SPF to do that within an hour, to freeze the accounts so that there is a higher chance that we can prevent the monies from going out of the system, so that we can return those monies to the victims.

The Chairman: Mr Vikram Nair.

Mr Vikram Nair: I just want to pick up on the point on international scams. I do not know whether it is Minister or the Senior Minister of State, but of the number of scams that are routed internationally, what percentage would that be and how effective are we in capturing these and recovering proceeds? I think you mentioned a number of about 70 people have been arrested, but what percentage is that of the bigger pool?

Ms Sun Xueling: Based on the numbers I have, more than 90% of scam cases that we know of originated from overseas. Like I have mentioned in my main reply, we work closely with foreign law enforcement agencies, but there are many operational challenges.

Not all foreign law enforcement agencies conduct their operations the way we do. They may face very specific challenges in their home countries, cities or villages. And that is something that we do not have control over. But where we can, it is definitely our desire to work with the foreign law enforcement agencies and after they find out who the perpetrators are, they conduct those raids, they inform us. Sometimes, they are able to recover some portion of the scam proceeds, because you can imagine that the scam proceeds actually move very quickly in the system, even if you were to trace them to Country A, which was where the scam proceeds first go to, you never know how those scam proceeds then find its way to other countries or to other parts of the banking system. Or they may even have been changed into non-cash proceeds, for instance.

So, I would just like to share with the Member that we definitely work with foreign law enforcement agencies, but we have to be mindful that there are operational challenges, and that even when they are able to recover some portion of the scam proceeds, there are actually many, many claimants to those scam proceeds. And so, there is some difficulty to be able to return those monies in its totality to the victim.

The Chairman: Mr Murali, would you like to withdraw your amendment?

Mr Murali Pillai: Mdm Chairperson, with your indulgence, I would like to thank the hon Members who filed 27 cuts spanning 52.5 minutes on various topics that made this debate quite enriching. But I also would like to extend my appreciation to hon Second Minister and the two hon Ministers of State for their responses and outlining their strategies to keep Singapore safe and secure. And I am sure the hon Members who join me in wishing them well in their respective missions. With that, Mdm Chairman, may I seek leave to withdraw the cut?

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

The sum of \$7,285,857,000 for Head P ordered to stand part of the Main Estimates.

The sum of \$1,020,392,400 for Head P ordered to stand part of the Development Estimates.

COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY – HEAD R (MINISTRY OF LAW)

(A safe and secure nation in turbulent times)

The Chairman: Head R, Ministry of Law. Mr Murali Pillai.

5.36 pm

Resilience-building and Access to Justice

Mr Murali Pillai (Bukit Batok): Mdm Chairperson, I beg leave to move "that the total sum to be allocated for Head R of the Estimates be reduced by \$100".

Last year, the hon Second Minister for Law lay emphasis on taking steps to secure our place in a post-COVID-19 world to ensure that we, as a country, will continue to thrive. This year, the hon Deputy Prime Minister in his Budget speech highlighted the need for resilience building to meet the challenges of the future. This was the same point I made in the debate last year. In my speech, I advocated that we identify strategic areas to build resilience both in the short and long term, even if it means that we have to incur some extra costs and inefficiency.

In the context of the Ministry of Law (MinLaw)'s work to build resilience, what was noteworthy during the pandemic was the stupendous amount of work done within a short span of time with its partners, including the Attorney-General Chambers, other Government bodies and the private sector, to enact a legal framework that re-ordered legal obligations that could not have been performed and simplify insolvency procedures. They drew on technology to provide online platforms for claimants, as well as public-spirited volunteers to be assessors of claims. The end products – in the form of legislative solutions – has been widely admired for their elegance, simplicity in implementation and incisive thinking while meeting the ends of justice during a very trying period of time.

The shape of these solutions, drawing as they do on general legal and policy principles, can be used again and again. I had previously suggested that we pass framework legislation that can be triggered, should our country face another similar crisis. The hon Second Minister demurred, stating that each crisis is likely to be different.

This may be true, but the general principles are likely to be the same. In these circumstances and with a view to ensure that future generations of Singaporeans will benefit from the legal lessons and insights gained from this unique experience, I would like to suggest that the MinLaw chronicle the efforts of itself and its partners over the pandemic period.

First, it would show that the chain of reasoning behind the legal structures which dealt with urgent and significant issues during the pandemic – these provide certainty and precedence for future events. Second, it will show their practical impact and outcome, which will allow us to plan better for the future. Thus, even though we have decided against framework legislation, the shape of what justice demands and confers during a pandemic is already known. This predictability and the ability to extrapolate from past experiences confer real resilience to our legal system.

Turning to civil proceedings, I would like to ask for an update on the following matters. First, the Hague Service Convention. Some years back, I suggested that Singapore accede to this Convention. The hon Minister in 2022 said that his Ministry is working on it. May I ask for an update please?

Second, the reform of the Civil Enforcement Framework. In November 2022, the hon Minister informed this House that his Ministry is working with stakeholders, such as the Minister of Social and Family Development (MSF) and the Courts, to make enforcement of civil and family Court judgments easier. May I seek an update please?

Third, an update on the probate e-service system. I had been advocating for this for quite some time. May I seek a confirmation on the rollout date, as well as the features of this system?

I now turn to community dispute management issues. It seems to me that, over the years, the Community Disputes Resolution Tribunals (CDRT) is seeing a trend of increasing applications filed by persons who have disputes with their neighbours. I feel that it is useful to deploy professional mediation services on site, so that these persons are engaged at the earliest opportunity before the problems become more intractable. I wonder if the hon Minister feels that there is value in greater deployment of professional mediators. If so, I would be grateful if he could tell us how to increase our deployment of mediation services in the neighbourhood.

I now turn to Protection from Harassment Courts (PHCs). The online Community Justice and Tribunals System (CJTS) has made it very easy for a person to lodge a claim. Whilst it is a good development, there are unintended drawbacks too. It is possible for a person to lodge a completely unmeritorious claim. Because of the design feature of the system, such cases will still be registered, the defendants will still have to be served with the Court papers and they still have to be hauled into Court to answer the allegations which, on the face of it, are frivolous and vexatious. In such a situation, ironically, it is the claimant who is the harasser.

We want to make the costs of filing complaints low, but when the cost of filing frivolous claims is zero, it is an invitation to play games. In November 2022, I suggested that applicable rules be amended to allow PHCs to summarily determine and dispose of frivolous and vexatious claims. The hon Minister was not with me. I seek a reconsideration of this matter.

Finally, I would like to ask about the Legal Aid Bureau's experience in providing legal advice through bot services to litigants in person, particularly those who are unable to afford to engage lawyers. Has this been popular and if so, I wonder if there are any plans to enhance these services?

Question proposed.

Managing Community Disputes

Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong (Hougang): Mdm Chairman, Members of this House will be familiar with residents approaching their Members of Parliament for help to resolve disputes they may have with their neighbours. These may involve frequent loud noises, use of space along common corridors, inhalation of cigarette smoke wafting into a person's flat from a neighbour's flat and so on.

For Housing and Development Board (HDB) flats, the first port of call would usually be for HDB to intervene and speak to neighbours involved. However, HDB officers would often engage the neighbours and request for their cooperation and consideration by the resident who is the subject of complaint. This may work for some of the cases, but for many cases, the problems may not be resolved.

If HDB is not able to resolve the dispute, it would often advise residents that they can refer the matter for mediation at the Community Mediation Centre (CMC) or even for resolution at the Community Disputes Resolution Tribunals (CDRT).

Mdm Chairman, mediation may not always work to resolve disputes even if attended to by both parties to a dispute. However, as mediation at CMC requires the agreed participation of both parties to a dispute, many such disputes do not stand a chance of being resolved by mediation, simply because one of the parties opts out of mediation. Some residents deliberately would not respond to mediation, I heard.

While I understand why mediation should be voluntary and while I do understand that mediation may not always be suitable for every dispute, I feel that for a good number of cases, it is a good opportunity wasted for parties to try and resolve their differences during mediation, when parties have the option to opt out.

I propose that we adopt a Court-based mediation where parties first have to go through a Court-led mediation when action is commenced at CDRT. If the matter cannot be resolved amicably, the dispute will continue to be adjudicated under the existing CDRT process. Such process is not new to the Courts and has been around in the State Courts for a number of years.

I would also suggest that to encourage a better attitude towards reasonable resolution, the attitude and conduct of parties at the mediation should be noted for purposes of the CDRT procedure.

Next, I have a few suggestions in respect of the CDRT process.

I urge the Government to review the CDRT process, and see whether the system and procedure can be made more user-friendly for laypeople of different educational backgrounds. While the procedure may already have been streamlined for easier filing and participation by laypeople, as compared to, say, our Court procedure for the State Courts, many are still intimidated by the procedural and the written evidential requirements, including even the demands of the initial claim filing requirements. Are we able to reduce some of these formalities further?

Can we also review to see how we can make it less intimidating and more user-friendly for people who are not proficient in English, as well as for our seniors?

Finally, while representation by lawyers are not allowed, judges hearing CDRT cases should also be alert for the possibility of one party engaging lawyers to guide them in running their case at CDRT, as this may not be fair to the other party. Perhaps parties should be required to declare —

The Chairman: Your time is up.

Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong: — at the onset that they have not engaged lawyers for assistance in any way.

5.45 pm

Mr Derrick Goh (Nee Soon): Mdm Chairman, can I take cuts (c) and (d) together?

The Chairman: Yes, please take your two cuts together.

Reframing Approach to Community Disputes

Mr Derrick Goh: Thank you. Mdm Chair, high-density living is part and parcel of life in Singapore. Inevitably, there are cases where neighbours misunderstand each other and end up in disputes.

In Singapore, I recognise that we have adopted both a legal and community solution. On the legal front, we have the CDRT and CMC.

Notwithstanding our efforts, the feedback I have received from residents in such situations is that the current community dispute resolution framework is not effective. They shared that errant neighbours do not comply with the orders of the CDRT or flout a mediation agreement. This is where our framework needs to have more bite to encourage compliance with the relevant orders and agreements.

In a recent engagement with Dr William Wan, Chairperson of the Community Advisory Panel on Neighbourhood Noise, what he told me echoed the need for more legal teeth, such as requiring mandatory attendance at mediations and to strengthen the enforcement of agreements between disputing neighbours.

He highlighted the Government's successful implementation of table littering rules at hawker centres, noting the high compliance by individuals given the threat of a fine. This example illustrates that a behavioural incentive model underpinned by legal sanctions can drive positive behaviour, leading to social benefits.

As MinLaw is uniquely positioned to consider the introduction of stricter enforcement within the community disputes framework, will the Minister review the prevailing policy to increase compliance of individuals with orders and agreements, and also provide us an update on the inter-Ministry review of the community dispute framework he mentioned last year?

Separately, I also believe that the key to an effective implementation is by taking a more proactive stance. Thus, the introduction of a regime of trained on-the-ground councillors to actively engage parties involved in a community dispute at an early stage might facilitate the CDRT process. In this regard, will MinLaw consider reviewing the existing framework to facilitate the use of persons with specialised knowledge to manage community disputes?

Reinvigorate Civil Enforcement Framework

Mdm Chair, Singapore has experienced robust growth and recognition as a reliable centre that is business-friendly and with a legal jurisdiction not just locally, but also on the international front. This has led to the in-flight of high-value multinational enterprises (MNEs) to establish their presence or headquarters in Singapore. This is key for Singapore's long-term growth and global presence.

Singapore has become the choice jurisdiction for many, for the conduct of complex and high-value litigations and dispute resolution for MNEs and high net worth individuals. It is, therefore, key for businesses and individuals to be able to rely on Singapore's legal system, not just for swift justice, but also effective justice.

In this regard, there is scope for improvements in our legal enforcement framework.

At the end of a civil litigation proceeding, it is usual for the Court to issue an Order or Judgment, for which it often involves a monetary sum known as the judgement sum. This judgement sum is often not easy to enforce. Therefore, it is not uncommon to hear corporates, as well as individuals, having trouble in enforcing these monies, which if not paid, makes this a paper judgement.

I recognise that the Singapore Courts has in recent years, improved the judicial process related to civil procedures to facilitate access to justice. As such, can the Minister explain the new measures, that MinLaw is considering, to improve the civil enforcement process in Singapore?

The Chairman: Mr Patrick Tay. Please take your two cuts together.

Updates on POHA and CDRT

Mr Patrick Tay Teck Guan (Pioneer): My first cut is on the Protection from Harassment Act (POHA) and CDRT.

Since coming into force in November 2014, can MinLaw provide an update on POHA cases and the POHA Court that has been set up, especially the number of cases settled and adjudicated? I ask for the POHA Court also to track the breakdown of the various types of POHA claims, for example, online versus offline, sexual harassment and workplace harassment cases.

I also wish to ask MinLaw to provide an update on CDRT cases and share the plans to better ensure the efficient and effective resolution of CDRT complaints, as there are more situations of work-from-home, resulting in more neighbourly disputes on the ground. Some of these disputes cannot be resolved via the voluntary mediation, via community mediation and so on. Would such mediation be eventually made compulsory?

Plight of Workers and Insolvent Companies

In the event of a company undergoing insolvency process, even though there is a priority of debts prescribed by law, workers' outstanding wages remain unsecured debts and there is usually little to no assets left to pay these workers' salaries, after all the company's secured debts have been satisfied.

An unpaid worker may still need to go through a protracted enforcement process against the company to recover unpaid salaries. This is further exacerbated during recent times when companies undergo other related proceedings, such as judicial management, where a moratorium is ordered where we cannot enforce our rights under a collective agreement and other due process without leave of Court, which is an onerous, cumbersome and costly process.

Just this month, one of my Pioneer Single Member Constituency (SMC) residents came to see me at my Meet-the-People Session as he had unpaid wages and Central Provident Fund (CPF) contributions for months because his company is undergoing judicial management. The judicial manager did not entertain him and till this day, he is still working in the company without being paid his salary, in the hope that the company turns solvent, as he has a wife who is undergoing cancer treatment. Can MinLaw do something about this unfortunate situation?

Litigants-in-person and Access to Justice

Dr Tan Wu Meng (Jurong): Chair, I have met Clementi residents who were litigants-in-person in family law proceedings; did not have a lawyer; and represented themselves. They found it very hard to find their way through the system.

Last year, I shared about my Clementi resident who wanted to vary a maintenance order after her divorce; litigant-in-person; did not have a lawyer.

She told us that to submit a security deposit, she needed to go through VITAL, a department under the Ministry of Finance (MOF). This took time to process. By the time the certificate of security deposit was issued, she had missed the deadline for appeal – we were told. She told us she had to liaise with CrimsonLogic, a service bureau which handled some of the transactions.

Can the Minister tell us what is the role of these additional intermediaries? Do they make it more complicated for laypersons who do not have resources of a law firm, especially persons who have limited resources, from the older generation, who might not be fluent in English?

What has been done since last year to make the journey less difficult for litigants-in-person in family law proceedings, especially Singaporeans who do not qualify for legal aid but do not earn enough to engage a lawyer?

Chair, in the implementation of our system, we must make sure that due process does not present undue difficulties or undue obstacles because justice delayed, justice disrupted, justice complicated may become justice denied.

The Chairman: Mr Vikram Nair, please take your two cuts together.

Legal Aid Bureau

Mr Vikram Nair (Sembawang): Chair, the Legal Aid Bureau is an important pillar of the access to justice, providing legal advice to those with lower income. Those who qualify for legal aid get free or low-cost legal representation and protection from adverse cost consequences if a decision goes against them.

However, there remains a significant cliff effect for those who fail to qualify for legal aid, since they will be on the hook for both legal fees and potential cost consequences.

The threshold includes having per capita income of less than \$950 and savings of less than \$10,000. This creates some anomalies.

I have encountered divorce cases where one party, usually the wife who is not working, qualifies for legal aid while the husband, who works but has a low-paying job, would not qualify for legal aid and ends up being unrepresented and at a disadvantage in the Court process.

In relation to this, I understand the Legal Aid Bureau has launched Divorce AIDE last year. How well has the service been utilised so far? Are there any further improvements envisioned for legal aid?

Public Defender's Office

While the Legal Aid Bureau had provided assistance on civil matters for individuals who need assistance in criminal matters, it was the Law Society's Criminal Legal Aid Scheme that had provided this assistance for many years.

Last year, in line with the announcement at the Committee of Supply (COS) debate, the Public Defender's Office (PDO) was launched, with the aim of providing assistance for criminal defence work.

The qualifying criteria is for people with household incomes of less than \$1,500 and savings of less than \$10,000. Certain types of cases are also excluded, including those punishable by death and those involving syndicated crimes.

I would be grateful if the Ministry can share how well utilised these services have been so far, including how many applications there were and how many have been provided with public defenders to represent them. Does the Ministry expect an increase to the numbers of people applying for public defence? Finally, will the Ministry also explain the considerations behind the means test and the difference for the means test for the PDO and the Legal Aid Bureau?

Progress on the Public Defender's Office

Mr Sitoh Yih Pin (Potong Pasir): Mdm Chair, I remember listening with interest during the Parliamentary Sitting for the Public Defenders Bill that was passed in August last year. I am not legally trained but I was supportive of the Government's move to set up the PDO to widen the ambit of providing access to legal representation for accused persons who are unable to afford it.

Members of this House would have experienced many requests for legal advice, aid or representation by residents or families of residents who require them. In the community, we have legal aid clinics or even lawyers – who are volunteers – who pitch in to give some guidance to residents who need legal assistance but are unable to pay the fees to retain a lawyer.

Many laypersons who have had the unfortunate need of having to deal with legal entanglements will tell you that it is not a pleasant experience. In particular, if a person is charged with a crime, it does not affect only the accused but greatly impacts family members and dependents. The situation is greatly aggravated if the family is from a lower-income household.

In such instances, while we have absolute and total faith in our Police and prosecutors in discharging their duties objectively and professionally, ensuring that accused persons have access to proper and professional legal representation will go a long way in assuring the public that we have a robust but fair criminal justice system that protects the interests of all.

I was, therefore, very pleased that the PDO was launched on 1 December 2022, with a higher means test of \$1,500 per capita household income and a wider coverage of offences, with exclusions.

I hope that the PDO will achieve its overarching objective of supporting accused persons with limited means to be legally well advised and professionally represented.

As we usually say, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. We shall await to hear of the good work of the PDO.

In the premises, I invite the Minister to share an update with this House on the PDO, in particular, on the number of applications received so far, the number of public defenders appointed and whether, at this early stage, we are seeing an increased number of applications for representation.

The Chairman: Mr Raj Joshua Thomas, please take your two cuts together.

Legal Help for Vulnerable Groups

Mr Raj Joshua Thomas (Nominated Member): Thank you, Madam. Parliament passed the Public Defenders Act and the PDO was set up last year. Could the Minister provide an update of the plans for the PDO this year, in terms of the number of staff it will hire and its expected caseload?

The Government had been funding the Criminal Legal Aid Scheme, now Pro Bono SG, for some years. As the PDO is taking on some functions of Pro Bono SG, could the Minister elaborate on whether the Ministry expects that it will continue funding Pro Bono SG in the long term and, if so, how it will ensure that it is not providing double funding to a Government body and an external private organisation carrying out similar functions?

Last month, I attended the launch of Pro Bono SG's Community Law Centre (CLC) in Hougang. Two lawyers are stationed full-time at CLC who are able to provide legal assistance to walk-ins on any legal matter, not just criminal matters. Importantly, CLC also works with a myriad of community organisations that they may refer these walk-ins to, in the event that the remedy may not be a legal one.

6.00 pm

This, Sir, is an important and valuable initiative that brings accessibility to legal advice, and ultimately to justice, right into the communities that may need it most, and not just on criminal matters – because people may face legal hurdles in many other areas of life, from family matters to harassment, and they may not know how to go about dealing with them. I am told by Pro Bono SG that they have seen people coming to see them from as far away as Boon Lay.

I hope the Government could consider continuing to provide funding to Pro Bono SG for more such initiatives. I hope to see more CLCs open up in more neighbourhoods in Singapore.

Sir, one of the hallmarks of Pro Bono SG was that the criminal cases were taken on by volunteer lawyers. Could the Government elaborate on how the PDO will continue to engage volunteer lawyers to ensure that the spirit of giving back continues to thrive in the industry, in particular as regards criminal aid?

Law Firms of the Future

Madam, the traditional business of law firms is being disrupted. Law firms of the future will be driven by technology, innovation and efficiency. Could the Minister elaborate on the progress of the Professional Services Industry Transformation Map (ITM) with particular focus on initiatives taken for the legal industry and whether there are plans for a refresh of the ITM? How do our firms stand with regards to new areas of practice, like digital tokens and currencies, as well as rapidly evolving areas like intellectual property and data privacy.

Will the Ministry also consider a review of the Bar exam syllabus to incorporate how lawyers can use technology, such that it becomes native to lawyers right from the start, that lawyering requires knowledge of the technology-powered tools and applications. Such education should also include the correct ways that such technology should be harnessed. For example, Chat GPT has many possible uses for lawyers, both good and bad. Looking at the technologies currently available, I do not think lawyers will be replaced by them, but those that do not start using them eventually will be replaced by those who can. Hence, I would also like to ask the Minister for an update on the Legal Tech Platform.

Manpower and Legal Technology

Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim (Chua Chu Kang): Madam, during last year's COS, I asked about how MinLaw is supporting firms to harness technology and digitalisation for their legal practice. Having invested heavily on technology and digital solutions, my firm is one of those that have utilised technology during the period of pandemic to handle clients, commercial transactions and international arbitration cases all over the world, across time zones, adding to my eyebags.

This meant that our clients' needs are being met and the experience, training and exposure of lawyers, especially younger ones, continue despite the disruption of the pandemic.

However, digitalisation is not without its challenges. Recently, the Courts in Singapore, like the State Courts and Syariah Court, faced technical issues in Court document filing. Further, some firms lack the resources to keep pace with the ever-changing legal landscape, which gives a clear advantage of terrain to those who employ technological means. The digital divide also gives an advantage to those who have the means to use technology – and those who have not.

How is MinLaw supporting lawyers especially younger lawyers and those in small firms, to better meet the evolving needs of our society and economy? How can digitalisation be harnessed in the legal sector, to ensure that justice remains accessible to all, regardless of social economic standing? And what are the steps and infrastructure that MinLaw is looking to set up to ensure that the Court electronic filing system and other processes can cope with the increasing caseload and future challenges?

Supporting Manpower with Technology

Mr Christopher de Souza (Holland-Bukit Timah): Madam, in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world, made all the more so because of the pandemic and the disruption across industries, the legal industry has seen unprecedented change. With the rise of Zoom and some work-from-home days, different skillsets and mindsets are required to adapt to new routines and norms. Cloud-based legal technology tools can be relied upon for document storage and communication. In addition, as more and more technology arise to assist the legal profession, how is MinLaw ensuring that the human element continues to be relevant? Such a partnership between legal manpower and technology will contribute to Singapore's post-pandemic economic growth.

In-house Counsels and Paralegals

Mr Patrick Tay Teck Guan: Chair, I declare my interest as Director of Legal for the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) and honorary member of Singapore Corporate Counsel Association (SCCA).

In-house counsels in Singapore form a significant and growing part of our legal fraternity. The number of in-house counsels has outstripped the number of lawyers in practice to date. Well-skilled in-house counsels greatly boost the value and expertise of companies to confidently close deals, act in line with compliance practices and navigate risks in a complex and changing world. This presents a great opportunity for our Singapore in-house legal counsels to differentiate themselves in their skillset as they help businesses move confidently into the region, while also helping to bring back crucial work to our private practice lawyers and others in related fields.

It is in this vein that I submit to MinLaw to provide even greater support and funding towards the training and professional development needs of in-house counsels in Singapore through SCCA.

By the same token, we also have a group of para-legals, also known as para-professionals or legal executives in law firms and corporate entities. Many of them graduated from the Diploma in Legal Executive Studies or the Diploma in Law and Management by Temasek Polytechnic or other educational institutions. When I last engaged this group of graduates, they also hope to build and boost their professionalism, competencies and standards, continuing education and career progression opportunities. They will, therefore, require further support from MinLaw in their drive towards this end.

How can MinLaw help to uplift and further enhance the in-house counsel and para-legal/para-professional fraternities through active support of their learning and skills development, as well as their career progression?

Evolving Needs of the Legal Industry

Ms Nadia Ahmad Samdin (Ang Mo Kio): Mdm Chair, in 2021, slightly under 60% of departures from the profession consisted of junior lawyers under five years Post-Qualified Experience (PQE). During the pandemic, many of the challenges that lawyers had been facing bubbled to the fore, including burnout, career progression and work culture. Work from anywhere, coupled with constant communication, adds to the pressures of lawyering. As we move forward in a new era, how is MinLaw supporting both senior and junior lawyers to better meet the evolving legal needs of society and economy?

Second, several changes to the admission regime recommended by the Committee for the Professional Training of Lawyers (CPTL) that were accepted by MinLaw will be implemented this year. Has MinLaw received feedback from students, law firms and other stakeholders on the readiness and progress for the implementation this year, including concerns around low trainee allowance?

Land Leases for Religious Purposes

Ms Sylvia Lim (Aljunied): Madam, religious organisations need a place to operate from. Today, many organisations operate on land which is leased to them by the Government for 30 years, and are subject to renewal thereafter.

I understand that some temples and churches find the sums charged for the issue and renewal of land leases to be very high. The sums they need to raise often require significant fund-raising efforts, which in turn take their energies away from their main mission of practising and propagating their faith.

I am aware that the Government is alive to these worries. MinLaw has announced that it is reviewing its policy in this area and had been consulting religious groups. The review has been going on for some months now. In answer to my Parliamentary Question filed in October last year, the Minister stated that state land parcels, including those allocated for Place of Worship use, were required to be sold at fair market value. He explained that this meant that the parcels of land were generally sold through a competitive tender process, where the highest acceptable price becomes the land price for the specific site. He attributed the rise in prices due to the competitive bidding process.

I understand that the Government review of land allocation and pricing framework for land for places of worship is ongoing. In the meantime, could the Ministry clarify what it is considering to mitigate the high prices, and when the review will be completed?

Dedicated Land Leases for Religious Institutions

Assoc Prof Jamus Jerome Lim (Sengkang): Churches, mosques, temples, and other religious institutions are cornerstones of our communities. They provide succour for the bereaved, counsel for the needy and guidance for the lost. Many have operated in the communities that they serve for long periods of time – decades, and in some cases, centuries.

During the recent Motion on affordability and accessibility of the Housing and Development Board (HDB), it became amply clear that property prices are high in Singapore in no small part due to the cost of land. And this cost is not only high, but exorbitant for institutions that are not fundamentally profit-making in nature.

The way some religious institutions have navigated this conundrum is to convert part of their operations into profit-making activities: they hive off part of their property for columbaria, childcare, coffee shops and carparks – I suppose you need the 4Cs in order to make the other big C, cash. And the most successful of those operating with this model even build a "super C" – shopping centres.

But I believe that it is unfair to expect every religious institution to engage in commerce; after all, some may hold the view that their earthly purpose is explicitly to reject such secular activities.

One solution is to recognise that religious institutions meet societal needs that are poorly valued by the market and, hence, are deserving of special consideration for their class of land leases. This is the case for pricing for land for mosques, which Minister Shanmugam explained – in a response to Parliamentary Question filed by my hon friend Sylvia Lim – results in lower prices.

Another alternative is to adopt the now-standard price quality method framework, which would place a greater weight on factors like the diversity of religious bodies in a given town, or the duration that a church or mosque or temple has served in a given community.

As I explained during the HDB debate, the Government already differentially prices land for different classes and uses of that land. These suggestions simply extend that logic to religious institutions.

Interim Use of Land

Mr Cheng Hsing Yao (Nominated Member): Mdm Chair, in land-scarce Singapore, we should optimise the use of land to cater to both short-term and long-term needs. Although the interim use of land is being applied, their tenures tend to be not more than 10 years. This limits the amount of investments that can be made into such lands or properties, therefore also limiting the range and quality of interim uses. Can state land that is not slated for development for 15 years and beyond be put to longer-term interim use?

I am mindful that entrenchment of interim uses can also impede long-term flexibility. Are there better ways to address that? Would it help if we supplement our master plan with an interim use plan that could guide land use on say 15, 30 and 45 years usage?

Revitalising State Properties and Lands

Mr Christopher de Souza: Singapore has about 730 square kilometres of land, and that scarcity has always pushed us to innovate and stretch our land options. We have done very well to reclaim land and build upwards and downwards to maximise use of our land. One other solution is to reuse state properties by converting underutilised plots of land into community spaces. Additionally, many existing plots of land have been converted into areas for Build-To-Order (BTO) flats.

More such spaces are necessary in our dense city to create spaces for people to exercise, view nature and spend time with family and friends. Given the limited land resources in Singapore, and considering our desire to preserve as much of our natural greenery as possible, how has MinLaw continued to seek out state properties that may be repurposed and rejuvenated for the community?

Rejuvenating State Properties and Lands

Ms Nadia Ahmad Samdin: Mdm Chair, as a small island city-state, land is a limited resource in Singapore. It is essential that land use and state properties are optimised for the community. I would like to ask how has the Singapore Land Authority (SLA) repurposed and rejuvenated state properties for the community? How does SLA decide which properties are selected, on what timelines and are there any upcoming plans that the public can look forward to?

In November last year, I briefly spoke about the upkeep and protection of the SLA-managed lands, such as the Southern Islands. Given the multitude of recreational and research activities on these islands, does SLA have any plans to work with other agencies in enhancing the frameworks and protections of these islands, for example, through zoning?

Mainstreaming Geospatial Capabilities

Prof Koh Lian Pin (Nominated Member): Mdm Chair, SLA develops and manages OneMap, which is the authoritative national map of Singapore. SLA has also been developing other state-of-the-art geospatial data management, analytic and delivery technologies.

Having ready access to trustworthy and spatially explicit information is more important now than ever to help us address climate change, sustainability and other emerging challenges and opportunities. What are the Government's plans to mainstream and leverage Singapore's geospatial capabilities, to inform and support policies, decisions and actions across all segments of Singapore society?

6.15 pm

The Chairman: Mr Lim Biow Chuan, please take your two cuts together.

Rejuvenation of State Properties

Mr Lim Biow Chuan (Mountbatten): Thank you, Mdm Chair. One of the many challenges facing Singapore is that we are a small country of about 730 square kilometres in size. There is competing demand for the limited land to be used for residential, industrial, commercial, roads and parks. Given the limited land resources in Singapore, it is important that the state maximise the best use of its available resources. I had previously suggested that we consider the car park space at sports stadiums to be used for parking by heavy commercial vehicles at night when the stadium is not being used. This could free up some space for heavy vehicles or commercial vehicles to park.

Thus, during off-peak hours, when there are no sporting activities at the stadium, the carpark is generally empty. Why can the state not allow better use of this empty car park space? We should look at different options to better make use of scarce land.

There is a vacant piece of state land next to Haig Court which has been vacant for some years. May I ask what are the factors being considered by SLA before it allows state land to be repurposed and rejuvenated for community use?

Digital Conveyancing Portal

Madam, I declare my interest in this topic as a conveyancing lawyer. Second Minister for Law, Mr Edwin Tong, announced in January 2023 the appointment of a vendor to develop the online platform to streamline the current paper-based conveyancing process and transform it into a fully integrated, efficient, transparent and paperless digital conveyancing process for all property transactions in Singapore. This platform is due to be fully implemented in 2026, which is barely three years from now.

Today, there are many people involved in the conveyancing process – lawyers, secretaries, clerks, agents and bankers. Their role is to ensure that parties, who are buying properties or assets worth millions of dollars, are properly protected and they are able to obtain title to the assets that they agree to buy.

I am unclear as to what the digital conveyancing portal means for conveyancing lawyers, clerks, agents and bankers. Should they start planning for a new career as this portal would be fully implemented in three years' time?

Conveyancing is not a straightforward process. Option to purchase are contractual terms to be negotiated between buyers and sellers. For title to properties, there are many leasehold properties being transacted. Many of these leases contain restrictions which have to be interpreted to the buyer. Some leases require a lessee to obtain consent from the lessor, in this case, sometimes, the state, before they sell the property; and some leases require consent before the lessee can mortgage the property. Typically, JTC leases require environmental baseline studies to be carried out before approval can be granted.

Madam, how would the digital conveyancing portal assist to make this entire process easier and more straightforward?

For e-payments, how does the portal prevent fraud from taking place? Would users of the portal be savvy enough to know the risk of paying to fake accounts?

Would the introduction of this portal introduce more complications to the conveyancing process rather than cut the red tape? Perhaps the Minister can clarify?

Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim: Madam, earlier this year, the SLA announced the appointment of a vendor to develop the Digital Conveyancing Portal (DCP) platform over three phases. The DCP was announced during COS in 2021.

May I seek an update on the progress of the DCP? How would the DCP be fully integrated with all agencies and stakeholders in the conveyancing process? What role would be for conveyancing lawyers to play in this regard? What are the steps that MinLaw have in mind to raise public awareness of the use and benefits of the DCP when fully implemented?

The Chairman: Minister Edwin Tong.

The Second Minister for Law (Mr Edwin Tong Chun Fai): Mdm Chairperson, good evening.

Madam, we are living in a time of change. Spurred by profound developments in the world, including all the experiences that Members have spoken about – geopolitical tensions; reconfiguration of economic value chains; technological developments; sustainability and climate change; and of course, the recently passed COVID-19 pandemic of which we have seen the worst of, and hopefully, we have put it behind us. And within Singapore as well, an ageing population and an increasingly educated and skilled workforce. All of these factors intertwined together, developing and reshaping the way we live, work and also interact with one another.

To ensure that Singapore continues to thrive amidst these changes, the MinLaw is working on various fronts. The scope – as you can see from the breadth of topics raised by Members – is diverse. Increasing access to justice; enhancing legal processes; optimising land utilisation and promoting land data; assisting businesses with protecting their intangible assets and intellectual property; and finding a platform for this to be commercialised and leveraged, for the industry to grow.

Whilst the work is wide-ranging, our vision is singular: bettering people's lives, creating value jobs, advancing our economy and society, through laws and policies. That ultimately, is the bottom line and the top line of what we do at MinLaw.

This, perhaps, is best encapsulated by our responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, which Mr Murali Pillai – thank you very much – commended. Our efforts provided reprieve to affected businesses and individuals. We amended various legislation and also enacted the COVID-19 (Temporary Measures) Act – which itself, was amended eight times since it was passed – to refine Singapore's response to the evolving and developing situation as we faced COVID-19 and its impact on businesses.

These measures covered a broad range of issues, such as: adjusting contractual obligations, providing rental relief and supporting distressed entities through insolvency.

Many of these steps unprecedented and novel, but also highly necessary.

Mr Pillai said we could chronicle our efforts as we went through these different challenges to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. Madam, we have accumulated that experience and will do so, and in fact, we will capture the gains that we have already made.

For example, we have made permanent, the powers of the Courts to conduct proceedings through electronic means, such as video conferencing in a variety of fashion, as Mr Pillai knows.

We are also considering whether some features of the Simplified Insolvency Programme can be adopted permanently, something I spoke about in Parliament, not long ago.

Moving forward, my Ministry will work along three broad thrusts. First, enhancing the trust, relevance and accessibility of our legal system for society. Second, contributing to and supporting economic activity in Singapore – by identifying and seizing new opportunities in the legal and intellectual property sectors. And third, optimising and rejuvenating our land and properties for the community.

Senior Parliamentary Secretary Rahayu Mahzam and I will address these themes and also address, as far as we can, the cuts that have been raised by Members.

Madam, last year, we saw the culmination of various initiatives that improved the efficiency, effectiveness and also, the accessibility of our legal system. This included: establishing the Sentencing Advisory Panel and the PDO; and also passing the Post-appeal Applications in Capital Cases Bill 2022.

We will continue in this vein to drive reforms and Senior Parliamentary Secretary Rahayu will elaborate on these programmes.

Let me start by addressing the queries on the Community Disputes Management Framework (CDMF) which various Members have raised – including Mr Pillai, Mr Patrick Tay, Mr Derrick Goh and Mr Dennis Tan, amongst others – about the framework and its role in reducing and mitigating community disputes.

As Members are aware, an interagency committee led by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY), together with the Ministry of National Development (MND), is conducting a comprehensive review of the CDMF.

The goal is threefold: first, to encourage pro-social behaviour; second, to facilitate amicable resolution of disputes between neighbours; and third, to deal with this as far as possible, at an early stage.

To achieve this, we are looking at enhancements in three broad areas.

First, as I said, early intervention – by building consensus through community norms. This will set shared expectations on acceptable community behaviours; set out standards to help shape this normative behaviour in the community. Senior Minister of State Sim Ann will share more details of this when she speaks at MND's COS.

Second, and I think we all know this; despite setting these norms and having these standards in the community, nuisance might still occur. In fact, very often, it will likely still occur. Perhaps, at a reduced rate.

The overall aim is to encourage, as far as possible, conciliation between neighbours, as much as possible. We live in an environment where we are close to one another and the best solution to dealing with community neighbourly disputes, is to find an amicable mediated position.

We are, therefore, going to be looking at setting up a team of dedicated personnel which will be able to leverage on stronger laws and more active facilitation to help neighbours resolve the issues upstream, before matters escalate and relationships deteriorate to an extent that, perhaps, matters become intransigent or deadlocked.

In the appropriate cases, personnel from this team may conduct investigations to understand the nature and the root cause of the problem, and might require, in the right cases, residents to attend a mandatory mediation and also require them to stop the actions that are causing the nuisance, pending mediation or resolution downstream by the CDRT.

More details of this process will be shared in MND and MCCY's COS in due course.

Let me explain MinLaw's work in the third area, which is in enhancing and improving the dispute resolution framework.

Even as we look at steps to enhance and improve this process, I said earlier that we intend to channel as much of these disputes as possible, through the mediated conciliatory route. That, I think, we all accept, is the best way of resolving a neighbour dispute. But, given that, there will be a number of these intransigent cases, we will work towards strengthening the powers and the processes of the CDRT – which some Members spoke about – so that it can provide faster and more effective relief in the appropriate cases.

Mediation can preserve and often even strengthen the relationship between neighbours by providing them with a platform, in the hands of a very well-trained mediator, to resolve their disputes amicably, in very much a win-win fashion.

Our experience has shown us that mediation is not just more effective, it is also quicker and cheaper. The data shows that mediation has been, by and large, successful.

We, therefore, believe that most community dispute cases will benefit from mediation. More than 80% of the voluntary mediation cases handled at the CMC were successfully settled. This number, of course, has got to be taken in context. It is for parties who voluntarily go to mediation, so they might, perhaps, be more predisposed to having an amicable resolution between themselves. Nonetheless, this statistic tells us that putting cases through mediation, at least as the first port of call, will likely yield effective results.

Part of the problem is that these voluntary cases handled at CMC represent a minority of the cases as many neighbours do not make this attempt at mediation. To provide specific figures, less than 30% of such voluntary cases proceed to mediation. In other words, of all cases that go to the CMC on neighbour disputes – usually on noise – less than 30% go on to voluntary mediation and of this, 80% of that number of cases are resolved amicably.

This, as I said earlier, could in part be because mediation is currently voluntary. And in addition, parties might think there is no issue to mediate; or they might think it is not effective at resolving the disputes between the parties; or they might decide to escalate the matter to CDRT without first attempting mediation.

So, to improve the take-up of mediation at an early stage, we plan to mandate mediation for three categories of cases.

First, mediation would be mandatory for certain types of community disputes and penalties will be imposed for not attending mandatory mediation. For instance, if you are required to go through a mandatory mediation and you do not, then the case will not proceed at CDRT.

Second, for voluntary mediation cases previously mediated and settled at CMC, but the mediated issues have resurfaced, or there is a new dispute related to what was mediated previously, CMC will be able to mandate re-mediation.

Third, as I said earlier, we will, in general, require disputing neighbours to undergo mediation before they file a case at CDRT. This will prevent disputes from unnecessarily escalating to a Court process.

6.30 pm

After we make mediation mandatory, the 80% figure that I said earlier may well come down, it may not be as high because you will now be including in this group of mediated cases, those cases where parties do not want or do not wish to find a solution amongst themselves.

Nonetheless, it is important to provide parties with that platform to seek an amicable resolution; and it can still be highly effective in the hands of a good mediator, and with some public education. Many Members in this House, as Mr Dennis Tan said earlier, have seen many of these cases in the course of their rounds when they visit their residents and their encouragement to refer these to mediation will help.

To give mediation more standing and teeth, we will also create a mechanism for settlement agreements mediated by the CMC to be registered and enforced as a CDRT Order, provided certain conditions are met. We will set out those conditions after we have studied that and introduced these.

To Mr Pillai's query on forward deploying mediation services, you know what the answer is likely to be. We believe that in the hands of a good mediator, many of these disputes can be resolved very amicably.

In many cases, part of the reluctance to go to mediation is because you are having a dispute with your neighbour three feet away and you do not want to get into a bus all the way down to the Central Business District about 45 minutes away, to do the mediation.

So, we believe in that it is a question of manpower, but I am pleased to share that CMC has begun offering mediation services at six satellite locations at selected ServiceSG Centres and also Community Clubs, some place within the precinct where the two neighbours are living or at least close by.

We will also offer online mediation for suitable voluntary neighbour dispute cases in two Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) as a pilot to start with. And we will decide how it works and, perhaps, look at scaling that up.

So, it removes – it sounds odd to say that in the context of Singapore – the geographical difficulties that they might face in trying to go down to a mediation when the party that they really should be speaking to is just three feet away. To support these efforts, the CMC has begun to increase the number of mediators on its panel of accredited community mediators and will look at growing this pool as quickly as possible.

Despite what I have said, some disputes will remain unresolved despite early intervention and best efforts at mediation and with all the efforts that we make at making mediation more accessible.

For these cases, the CDRT will continue to serve as an avenue of last resort. We will make improvements to address feedback that laypeople face in collecting evidence, which has been raised in this House before, and navigating the CDRT's process and procedures.

MND's initiatives, which Senior Minister of State Sim Ann will speak about later, will complement the mediation and the CDRT process.

In addition, we are also studying how best to address cases where a person's act of nuisance may be linked to an underlying mental health condition. Furthermore, there will also be stronger measures to deter non-compliance with the CDRT's orders. Lastly, we are also taking steps to ensure that residents are, in fact, aware of and have the resources to utilise these tools to help themselves resolve these disputes.

Residents may have questions such as: what is mediation? Or how do I explain my concerns to the mediator? And, perhaps, how do I prepare for a CDRT hearing?

We are, thus, working with partners in our community to provide residents facing such disputes with advice and guidance; and possibly also, legal representation in the more complex cases.

One example is what Mr Raj Joshua Thomas spoke about, the new CLCs run by Pro Bono SG. It was launched recently in January 2023 and this effort brings legal services right into the heartlands. For the first time, full-time community lawyers will serve the community through the CLCs, providing legal advice and assistance on a whole range of different issues.

To Mr Thomas' point on the CLCs, Pro Bono SG does indeed have plans to expand the CLCs beyond the pilot that is currently at Tian De Temple. We are supportive of the work that they do, and the Government will assess at an appropriate juncture how best to support this expansion.

Madam, I turn now to how we are strengthening Singapore as a legal services and intellectual property (IP) hub.

We continue to push ahead in enhancing Singapore's hard-earned position and reputation as a leading legal services and IP hub. This, I think, Members will appreciate is necessary, not just to grow the legal and IP sectors, but also to support Singapore's broader status as a centre for commerce, banking and finance.

But as Members have noted, there will be challenges ahead. As Mr Zhulkarnain, Mr Christopher de Souza and Ms Nadia Ahmad Samdin pointed out, our society and our economy are evolving. This will have an impact on our legal needs, and consequently, on law firms and lawyers.

As Mr Thomas noted, law firms are being disrupted by technology and innovation. Mr Thomas asked about the progress of the initiatives under the Professional Services ITM. The Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) will be providing more details of the refreshed ITM during their COS.

Let me share what MinLaw is working on, and I will touch briefly on two aspects: one, on infrastructure; and two, on manpower development.

First, infrastructure. Technology has changed how judicial and legal services are delivered and consumed. Our Courts and law firms need to equip themselves with the necessary tools.

The Courts have put in place measures to ensure that the case management systems can deal with an increasing caseload – a comment raised by Mr Zhulkarnain.

The Courts have various electronic filing systems to deal with different types of cases. Each of these case management systems are constantly reviewed and enhanced, where necessary, to ensure that they meet the caseload.

The product teams for each system also track the utilisation rates of the servers, to anticipate necessary hardware and software upgrades, and also the occasional surge in demand. This approach, by and large, has served the Courts well.

While there are occasional disruptions due to unforeseeable hardware failures, software and servers are progressively being shifted to the latest cloud infrastructure to reduce such occurrences.

Where future challenges are concerned, the Courts have planned various enhancements to cater for an increasing need to allow citizens to file applications directly, so that they can cut out the intermediary process and be able to do so on their own. Senior Parliamentary Secretary Rahayu will elaborate on this.

Together with other efforts, the Courts are ready to meet future challenges and will continue regular dialogue with stakeholders, to better address user needs.

For law firms, we recognise it will be challenging for them, especially the small and medium-sized Singapore Law Practices (SLPs). It is more difficult for them to curate, customise and, perhaps, develop their own IT solutions, mainly due to the lack of economies of scale.

MinLaw has, therefore, taken on this role and launched the Legal Technology Platform (LTP) in July last year. The LTP is a matter management and collaboration tool, customised for legal workflows. In other words, developed to fit intuitively the legal workflow process that each firm, particularly a smaller firm, might need and require at the backend and it progressively also deals with needs at the front end.

Through the LTP, SLPs can manage and collaborate on matters more seamlessly internally and also with their clients externally. They can also access data from commonly used practice and document management systems, such as Tessaract, Clio, TessaCloud and NetDocuments.

Mr Thomas asked about the reception of the LTP. As of January 2023, the LTP has been adopted by 27 Singapore-based firms, with around 550 Singapore-based users.

Let me illustrate the point with reference to one firm's example and experience. This firm is Albakri LLC, a small SLP.

Instead of copying and pasting from past Microsoft (MS) Word documents, the firm created its own matter templates and listed all the tasks relevant to a particular matter on the LTP. This enables its new associates to familiarise themselves independently with the firm's processes and workflow. It not only frees up the partners' time to supervise and train the associates, but also helps to institutionalise the firm's know-how and knowledge bank.

The firm's templates are now in a cloud-based repository, instead of the email archives of the individual lawyers – so that there is more institutional knowledge even when lawyers leave the firm and new ones come in. This has saved 50% of the onboarding time for new matters.

And seeing its usefulness, the firm has also contributed a matter template on probate. This is now publicly available through the LTP.

So, firms after seeing how it works for them, can decide that it wants to contribute a template, which will then be shared across on LTP. Other firms can access this and, eventually, level up using these best practices that are shared on the LTP.

Moving forward, we plan to enhance the LTP with more features desired by SLPs. We have constantly taken soundings from them to check on how they have used it, and what else they would like to see. For example, come April this year, the LTP will be able to process information from systems, such as eLitigation and the Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority (ACRA); and also integrated with Sign with Singpass.

To complement the LTP, we have worked with the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) and our industry partners to develop the Legal Industry Digital Plan (IDP).

This is an additional resource, to guide SLPs on how the LTP and other tools work together complementarily to support their digital transformation. It will also provide guidance on how SLPs can shore up their cybersecurity and data protection measures.

The second aspect I want to speak about is manpower development – a point touched on by Mr Christopher de Souza, Mr Zhulkarnain, Ms Nadia Samdin and Mr Thomas.

As Members have recognised, technology is an enabler. It helps our law firms and our lawyers to work more efficiently and effectively. But it cannot replace human beings; it cannot replace the human lawyers.

For example, in family and criminal cases, where we are dealing with a range of emotions. So, it is not just the legal considerations or what the law might say, but what are those special, peculiar idiosyncrasies and emotions that go behind each decision that might be made, particularly in family and criminal matters.

In complex cases, where we are dealing with different contexts, different nuances and, perhaps, also in the context of business done in Singapore or through Singapore, the Asian way of doing business context and the particular experience that a lawyer has with his or her client, all that is not something that an AI, like a chatbot, can easily replicate.

Indeed, ChatGPT, the most invoked chatbot tool that we have seen in recent times, it did pass the law exams with a C+. It is an apt example. Reports say that it may be helpful at producing a first draft for lawyers to consider but, as I said, it does not deal with the range of emotions that might lie behind why a client might choose a certain course of action, in a range of cases.

And it will also struggle with the most classic components of law exams, such as spotting the potential legal issues and also the deep analysis of applying the legal rules to the particular situation and nuances of the particular case, and also appreciate the human dynamics and personal idiosyncrasies which may lie behind even the most complex of complex corporate transactions.

Therefore, what we need to do – and in fact, what we have to do – is to re-double our efforts on developing our human talent, as much as we need to invest in technology.

We will be launching an industry-wide secondment programme, which aims to deepen the capabilities of lawyers in important markets, as well as new or high growth areas, such as sustainability, technology and mergers and acquisitions (M&A). We are targeting to have an intake of 30 lawyers a year, at a steady state.

We are also exploring exchange programmes with foreign Bar associations, with the objective being to help Singapore lawyers build networks externally. Because of globalisation, transactions are now very much cross-border and relations that we develop with other lawyers from other jurisdictions will give our lawyers a leg-up. They will also gain a deeper understanding of the work in priority markets through overseas attachments or study visit opportunities.

Next, let me touch on legal education reforms. As the Chief Justice announced, at the Opening of the Legal Year (OLY) this year, a Working Group, comprising MinLaw, members of the Judiciary, the profession, law schools and legal education providers, has been formed to conduct a holistic review of our legal education system.

This will take into account the evolving needs of our society and economy – very much the various points raised by Members earlier about taking onboard today's context, evolving needs, what we foreshadow and forecasts that we might need for tomorrow's profession. This will include areas of practice which are new, emerging or growing, for example, in technology and civil law, and applies to law schools and also to continuing professional development.

Mr Thomas suggested reviewing the Bar exam syllabus to incorporate harnessing technology. Based on feedback from the industry, the current generations of law students are generally technologically-savvy.

Nonetheless, as part of the Singapore Institute of Legal Education's (SILE) recent review of the Part B Syllabus, contemporary legal issues, such as law and technology, and the use of technology in practice have also been incorporated to better prepare candidates for practice.

This will, no doubt, equip law students and lawyers as well with the knowledge and skills they need for practice, and prepare them for the challenges ahead. This will hopefully allow them to develop a more sustainable career in the legal industry.

6.45 pm

Madam, legal practice is tough: long hours, demanding clients, transactions that need to be done quickly overnight. There is a lot of stress, whether it is from clients and sometimes, from Judges when you appear in Court, and fellow practitioners. The competition can be intense.

As the President of the Law Society, Mr Adrian Tan, noted in his speech at the OLY, in 2022, it had its first membership reduction in half a decade.

I looked at the numbers that Mr Tan cited. He cited them as of 31 August 2022. Shortly before that, a batch of new lawyers for the year were mass called, introduced and called to the Bar.

If we take this account, then, there would, in fact, have been a gradual small increase in the total number of Singapore-qualified practising lawyers over the years.

So, to give Members some idea of the numbers, from around 5,400 practitioners in 2017 to around 6,400 practitioners in 2022. That said, when we looked at the trends and did a more granular review, it is apparent that, although it is increasing, but the rate of increase of the number of qualified practising lawyers has come down. So, it is increasing but the rate of increase has slowed. And, in part, this is due to a decrease in the number of returning overseas law graduates, and also, as Mr Tan pointed out, an increase in attrition.

But at the same time, I would say attrition from private practice is not new. Those of us who are lawyers and have been in practice for a while, would have seen the trend, even from before. It is not a new phenomenon. Lawyers now – in fact, today – have more options than in the past and can leave private practice but still contribute within the legal sector. They can join the Government. They can join legal tech companies. They can enter academia. And like Mr Patrick Tay said earlier, greatly boosting legal services as in-house corporate counsel. And the lawyers who leave practice carry with them that experience from practice into these other fields which are adjunct to practice but also serving the legal industry. This is not necessarily a bad outcome, because we need legal talent to support all aspects of our economy and our society.

Ms Nadia Samdin referred to young lawyers experiencing burnout. Making private practice sustainable is something which the Government cannot alone achieve. It has got to be working with bodies like the Singapore Academy of Law, Law Society and even firms. And it requires effort from all of these parties because the work environment, we know, has a direct impact on the well-being of lawyers.

And I am heartened to note that, on this score, the Law Society has a number of support schemes available for mentorship, guidance on career-related issues, or support with stress management. One example is the Members' Assistance and Care Helpline, a one-stop referral and information service that Law Society members can turn to when faced with issues at work.

Our efforts also extend to other professionals within the legal industry. Mr Patrick Tay asked how we are supporting them.

For in-house counsel, we work closely with the SCCA, of which Mr Patrick Tay is an honorary member, to promote community building and to roll out training and development initiatives. Examples include a mentorship programme and courses for targeted upskilling for corporate counsel.

MinLaw also supports training providers in the development of programmes that build up capabilities of the legal community. These are also made available to in-house counsel.

For paralegals, we are studying how paralegals can take on more functions to support the work of lawyers and law firms. This is part of the legal education reforms that the Working Group, which I mentioned earlier, is also studying.

Finally, Ms Nadia Samdin touched on the upcoming changes to the admission regime, as recommended by the CPTL.

MinLaw previously announced the uncoupling of admission to the Bar from the completion of a practice training contract, and also the lengthening of the Practice Training Period from six months to one year. This was to take effect from 2023 session of the Part B of the Singapore Bar Examination onwards.

However, MinLaw noted feedback from the industry that the COVID-19 pandemic, work from home and other such measures, had caused disruptions to work. With the recent resumption of travel and business activities, more time is needed to prepare for these changes. Therefore, these changes, that were announced previously, will be deferred and implemented from the 2024 session of the Part B of the Singapore Bar Examination onwards. More information will be available from MinLaw and other stakeholders in due course.

Madam, I would like to circle back to the point about our changing world, which Members had underscored. Our world is evolving, in no small part, because of digitalisation and new technologies. This heightens the importance of protecting intangible assets (IA) and intellectual property (IP).

Therefore, let me share our IP strategy, which aims to prepare our businesses as they digitalise and innovate in the global economy, which is intrinsically linked with IA.

MinLaw, MOF and MTI are driving the Singapore IP Strategy 2030, or SIPS 2030. SIPS 2030 is a 10-year blueprint to strengthen and cement Singapore's position as a global IA and IP hub. As part of SIPS 2030, we have been working to support businesses to leverage their IA and IP for growth.

This year, we will be introducing the Intangibles Disclosure Framework. The intention is to provide a consistent basis for businesses to disclose and communicate details of their intangibles. A framework, so that everyone speaks the same language and can understand what that disclosure is meant to describe. This will provide stakeholders with comparable information about the businesses' intangibles, so that more informed assessments of the business and financial prospects can be made. This will, in turn, facilitate intangible asset commercialisation, transactions and financing.

In addition, we will launch GoBusiness IP Grow. It is an enterprise-centric online platform which will help businesses understand their IP needs based on their business activities; match businesses to appropriate IP services providers based on the particular business model they are practising and using, and also provide one-stop access to enterprise IA and IP-related resources.

Finally, let me now turn to address the review of the land allocation and pricing framework for places of worship, raised by Ms Sylvia Lim and Assoc Prof Jamus Lim. The Government is aware of these issues, as Ms Lim had noted in her speech.

We had, in fact, given a previous Parliamentary reply which Ms Lim also noted. It was noted then, and let me just reiterate, that we have been reviewing the land allocation and pricing framework for places of worship, to see how the price can be mitigated, bearing in mind the concerns that the Member raised. We have given our response previously, and we have been looking at this.

And as Members would appreciate, this has been the subject of very careful study, given its implications on land allocation and pricing. This study is still ongoing, and details will be released when we have completed the study.

In the meantime, the Government has been working with affected religious organisations to assist them in mitigating the increase in land prices. So, for instance, this would include offering the religious organisations a short-term tenancy extension, pending the outcome of this review that we are undertaking. This is so that these organisations would not be compromised by entering into a long-term lease arrangement on the present framework before the review is completed.

Madam, Senior Parliamentary Secretary Rahayu will cover the other cuts. I thank Members for their support of MinLaw's work, for their speeches and look forward to their continued cooperation, support, and also for their continued feedback that they give to MinLaw, which helps us to sharpen each of our policies and ensure that the last mile delivery is carried out in a way which it is intended.

The Chairman: Senior Parliamentary Secretary, Ms Rahayu Mahzam.

The Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Law (Ms Rahayu Mahzam): Mdm Chairperson, I will focus on two of MinLaw's themes: enhancing the trust, relevance and accessibility of the legal system; and optimising land use through greater collaboration and the use of technology.

Our legal system is a cornerstone of society that allows us to thrive economically and maintain order and justice. MinLaw is, therefore, committed to bringing a better quality of life for our people through enhancements to the legal system.

Today, I will elaborate on efforts to increase access to justice, support individuals navigating family justice processes, make enforcement of judgments cheaper and easier, and utilise technology to enhance legal processes.

Being able to access the legal system is a pillar of the rule of law. Our efforts are channelled towards two areas.

First, supporting vulnerable groups that require legal assistance.

Besides the Community Law Centre that Minister Tong shared, there are other forms of legal aid and assistance provided by non-Government partners, some of which are available to foreigners.

There are about 70 legal clinics run by various community, religious and voluntary welfare organisations. For instance, the Migrant Worker Legal Clinics was launched by Pro Bono SG, in partnership with other members of the Migrant Workers' Group. MinLaw is also working with Pro Bono SG and others to develop a one-stop portal to provide legal information and connect users to additional resources and assistance. It will also enable better coordination of legal clinics, such that legal advice will be more accessible.

We welcome Mr Raj Joshua Thomas' comments and will continue to strengthen the network of support.

Second, we continually review Singaporeans' level of access to legal help and representation in Court.

For civil legal aid, since 1958, the Government has been delivering aid to deserving cases. For criminal legal aid, the broad principle, for a long time, was that the Government should not pay to defend accused persons, except in capital cases. Over the years, we have moved to fund a part of the costs. In 2015, the Government started funding the Criminal Legal Aid Scheme (CLAS) directly.

Last year, the Government decided to do more, establishing the PDO. The PDO, set up in December 2022, increases access to justice. The coverage of criminal defence aid has been expanded to the bottom 35% of resident households and covers offences in all but 10 Acts.

Responding to Mr Vikram Nair, Mr Sitoh Yih Pin and Mr Thomas, I am glad to share that the PDO has started off smoothly. Thirteen public defenders have been hired. As of 31 January 2023, more than 250 applications have been received. Of about 130 applications which have completed assessment, about 60 applications have been assessed to be eligible for criminal defence aid.

The PDO also collaborates closely with Pro Bono SG to co-deliver criminal defence aid, ensuring it is administered efficiently and that we minimise duplication.

For example, all applications for criminal defence aid by Singaporeans and Permanent Residents (PRs) are assessed by PDO. Then, there is a two-step process that determines which cases go to PDO or CLAS. Urgent cases are assigned to PDO. This ensures timely legal representation is provided. The remaining bulk of cases are shared between PDO and CLAS. The actual cases will be assigned based on the relative workload and capacity of PDO and CLAS, to ensure resources of both are used efficiently.

With the increase in coverage, we expect that volunteer lawyers will continue to play a role in ensuring justice is accessible to all segments of society. The Government's partnership with CLAS will help to preserve the pro bono spirit of the legal fraternity, which remains a key pillar of legal aid.

We will conduct a review of the criminal defence aid system at an appropriate juncture to determine how to leverage the strengths of CLAS and the PDO in the long term.

As it has only been three months since its establishment, we will continue to monitor the caseload of the PDO closely to see that there is adequate staffing and capacity.

To Mr Nair's query, the criminal defence aid means test threshold is pegged at PCHI of \$1,500, or the 35th percentile of households by income, while the civil defence aid means test is pegged at PCHI \$950, or the 25th percentile of households by income.

We had increased the criminal defence aid income threshold, as a study conducted by MinLaw showed that households around the 35th percentile will find it challenging to afford legal representation before the Courts, even for plead guilty cases.

On the civil legal aid means test criteria, we had recently revised the criteria in end-2019. We will review the civil legal aid means test criteria in due course.

I turn to family justice, an area that has a deep impact on the lives of individuals.

The Divorce Assets Informative Division Estimator (Divorce AIDE) was launched in September 2022. It is an online tool aimed at improving access to legal services. Divorce AIDE educates users on how matrimonial assets are generally divided upon divorce, and the estimated share and amount they are likely to receive from the matrimonial assets.

Its algorithm provides an indication of a reasonable range that parties can receive from the pool of matrimonial assets, post-divorce. Parties can use this to consider whether to settle the division of matrimonial assets amicably.

On Mr Murali Pillai's query as to whether the needs of the children are taken into account by the algorithm, this will have to be separately considered when negotiating a settlement. Children's needs are particular to each family and cannot be easily reduced to an algorithm.

For instance, if there are children with special needs, parties may consider not dividing the insurance policies and setting them aside for the children's benefit. If the children need to stay near their schools, selling the matrimonial flat may not be the most viable option. Moreover, on the day-to-day needs, their monthly expenses would be more appropriately dealt with by fixing child maintenance, as opposed to assets division.

7.00 pm

Divorce AIDE has received positive feedback from social workers, Judges and our partners. For example, feedback from the Community Justice Centre (CJC) noted it is "very easy to use"; "helpful in explaining and answering my questions on divorce"; and "an outstanding tool that litigants-in-person will find useful".

We will refine Divorce AIDE in the upcoming year, a point mentioned by Mr Nair. Our efforts are two-fold. First, we will collect more feedback to see how the tool has been useful and how it can be further improved. Second, we are exploring possible integration with MyInfo. If successful, this will provide a more seamless experience, as users' Central Provident Fund (CPF) and HDB information may be extracted directly.

There are various forms of support for self-represented persons (SRPs) who commence, or wish to commence, proceedings. Dr Tan Wu Meng shared how his resident, an SRP, had to approach CrimsonLogic and VITAL. He asked about the role of these intermediaries, and if they complicate the process for SRPs.

Let me explain.

First, the Judiciary's case filing system, eLitigation, enables lawyers with a subscription to e-file documents and pay filing fees. SRPs can approach the CrimsonLogic Service Bureau, who will assist them with their e-filing and collect the filing fees.

Second, SRPs generally do not interact with VITAL. SRPs only interact with VITAL when a Court deposit is required. For example, when an SRP files an appeal, he or she is required to provide security for costs. SRPs would have to deposit the security with the Accountant-General, with VITAL acting as its collecting agent.

To make these processes more convenient for SRPs, several initiatives have been rolled out, and others are in the pipeline.

In 2022, the Family Justice Courts (FJC) introduced an e-service that allows SRPs to e-file for simplified divorce, without having to go to the CrimsonLogic Service Bureau. It was designed with SRPs in mind. Amongst other things, the e-service uses guided questions to assist applicants in filling up Court forms. It is also integrated with MyInfo, which allows an applicant's particulars to be automatically populated.

Further, as Mr Murali Pillai alluded to, a similar e-service for straightforward probate applications is targeted to be introduced by 2023. This will be applicable to the large majority of uncontested probate cases, such as those involving a single executor and with lesser quantum of assets.

For other applications, the CrimsonLogic Service Bureau has been re-sited from Chinatown Point to the one-stop service hubs in the Supreme Court and State Courts. SRPs can file applications via the Service Bureau, access case management systems from self-help terminals, and carry out related Court processes from a single location. A similar service hub will be set up in FJC when it moves to its new location in 2024.

As for putting up security for costs, FJC has published an online guide on the procedure for doing so and VITAL's contact information. Furthermore, VITAL has allowed SRPs to make e-payments since 2020.

Dr Tan Wu Meng raised the issues of delays in VITAL processing payments. I would like to inform Dr Tan that as part of the Court's efforts to streamline processes for Court users, today, an appellant can file an appeal, as long as he or she is able to produce a signed declaration and evidence of a bank transfer. This ensures that any delay in processing the payment or issuing the receipt does not result in an appellant missing out on the filing deadlines.

Besides these enhancements, there are two further areas that we have worked on, to make family justice more accessible to SRPs. First, we try to ensure information on Court processes and procedures is readily available. The Courts publish on their website comprehensive information about Court processes and procedures.

FJC also published a case management guidebook which guides SRPs through the divorce process and a guidebook on common family Court orders.

For those not fluent in English, digital and physical brochures on family law and Court processes in vernacular languages are available at the Judiciary's website and at FJC. Where more explanation is needed, SRPs can seek help from the Community Justice Centre (CJC) located within the premises of the State Courts and FJC.

Second, there are online tools and resources that SRPs may find useful. Besides Divorce AIDE that I mentioned earlier, the Legal Aid Bureau's iLAB chatbot provides tailored legal information on divorce, family violence, and issues related to employment. It is also able to generate simple legal documents. In the past year, information on civil cases was added to iLAB. Currently, there are 10 topics in iLAB.

Responding to Mr Murali Pillai, iLAB is useful for users who have little to no legal knowledge. Users have also given feedback that iLAB saves time and is convenient to use. We will continue collating feedback to improve iLAB.

The efforts to enhance access to justice in family proceedings is a continuing one. MinLaw has been working with MSF and FJC on a Bill to effect the remaining recommendations of the Committee to Review and Enhance Reforms in the Family Justice System.

The proposed changes aim to build on our efforts to reduce acrimony in family proceedings and ensure a fair outcome without undue complexity and costs for the parties. This increases access to justice for litigants, especially those who cannot afford legal representation.

An area of attention is the current challenges in enforcing maintenance orders, a point mentioned by Mr Murali Pillai. Non-compliance with maintenance orders has an adverse impact on those who are relying on the maintenance payments to go about their daily lives.

Unresolved disputes over maintenance also hinder the parties from moving forward with their lives.

I would like to share the story of Ms B, a divorced working mother with two young children. Upon divorce, the ex-husband was ordered to make monthly maintenance payments to Ms B for the two children. After a few months, the ex-husband began missing payments. At one point, he had failed to make payment for more than five months. The situation caused Ms B great distress – she had to cover the substantial costs of the children's school fees, transport and daily necessities. In less than a year, Ms B filed two applications to enforce the maintenance order. She had to spend considerable time and was unable to afford a lawyer to aid her in the proceedings, given her financial responsibilities to her children.

The proposed reforms will make the enforcement of maintenance orders simpler and more efficient. For example, in the current process, parties have to make several trips to court. The reforms aim to streamline proceedings and reduce the number of trips that parties make to Court. This will reduce the burden on those without lawyers. We will provide more details in due course.

Next, the Protection from Harassment Court (PHC) was established to provide simplified, expedited processes to enhance access to justice for harassment victims.

Responding to Mr Patrick Tay, the data is encouraging. Since its operationalisation on 1 June 2021, more than 90% of the Protection Order (PO) and False Statement Order applications filed were on the simplified track. Anecdotally, the majority of cases are handled by the litigants, without the need for legal representation.

There has been a significant increase in the number of PO applications, as well as orders granted. From 2019 to 2020, 319 PO applications were filed; 146 POs were granted in that period. From 2021 to 2022, there were 924 PO applications filed – 866 applications were filed from the operationalisation of the PHC on 1 June 2021 to 31 December 2022.

Out of the 924 PO applications, 302 POs were ordered, 413 PO applications were withdrawn. Applications may be withdrawn because parties reached an out-of-Court resolution, or the claimant decided there is no longer a need for a PO. The remaining 209 PO applications are either pending resolution or were dismissed. Where urgent relief is sought, the PHC generally hears the application within two to three working days from the date of application.

Mr Tay asked for a breakdown of the types of cases.

Members should note that one case may involve more than one type of harassment. Out of the 866 PO applications filed from 1 June 2021 to 31 December 2022, 304 cases involved cyberbullying; 295 cases involved doxxing; 203 cases involved workplace harassment; 103 cases involved sexual harassment; and 75 cases involved harassment by debt collectors, moneylenders or creditors.

Mr Pillai resurfaced his proposal from last year to amend the PHC rules to summarily determine and dispose of frivolous and vexatious claims, without notifying the respondent.

As explained in a written reply to Mr Pillai's question in Parliament previously, as part of due process, the Courts will usually require the respondent's side of the story to determine whether the claim is indeed frivolous or vexatious. We should also be mindful that many claimants in the PHC are SRPs, so the bar cannot be placed too high. Otherwise, this could inadvertently prevent access to justice for them.

On the other hand, the PHC has powers to deal with frivolous or vexatious cases. For claims filed through simplified proceedings, the PHC has powers to make such orders and directions as it thinks fit for the just, expeditious and economic disposal of a case. The PHC therefore may, notwithstanding that the proceedings were already simplified, deal with a case which is frivolous, vexatious, or otherwise an abuse of process in an expedited way.

For claims filed through standard proceedings, the normal procedures in the Rules of Court, such as striking out, are available.

Further, the PHC can award costs and disbursements against a claimant who brings a frivolous or vexatious case. This should deter any litigant who thinks they can misuse the PHC's simplified processes.

Finally, the General Division of the High Court is empowered to make a restraint order against a claimant, who has repeatedly commenced actions totally without merit. This prevents such a claimant from commencing actions or applications.

Various stakeholders, including the Judiciary, are pulling in the same direction to enhance access to justice.

The Judiciary is setting up an Access to Justice Programme Office. This will provide an even greater emphasis and focus on access to justice from a Whole-of-Judiciary perspective.

The Office will coordinate access to justice efforts across the Courts, review existing citizen-facing services and processes, and embark on new projects to improve the experience of Court users. For a start, some areas of focus will include enhancing accessibility to information, integrating services for the greater convenience of Court users, and improving the overall end-to-end service experience.

I turn to upcoming changes to strengthen Singapore's legal system.

As mentioned by Mr Pillai and Mr Derrick Goh, MinLaw has been studying possible reforms to the civil enforcement framework. MinLaw's project focuses on making enforcement cheaper and easier, so that those who have succeeded in their claims, are not denied their fruits simply because they feel enforcement is too complex or expensive.

Possible changes include: (a) giving the Court more powers to identify the assets and means of a non-compliant judgement debtor – with more information, the successful party can better decide whether and how to enforce the judgement; and (b) introducing new powers to deter and punish non-compliance with Court orders.

This will go some way towards alleviating the difficulties faced by judgement creditors today.

More broadly, these reforms will ensure Singapore's legal system remains robust, efficient and business-friendly. This will, in turn, help to preserve Singapore's status as a dispute resolution hub, a point raised by Mr Goh.

The proposed reforms, which affect enforcement of all civil judgements, are complex and may have far-reaching changes that have to be studied carefully. We have been working closely, over the past year, with the Judiciary and other stakeholders to refine the proposals. More details will be announced in due course.

I would highlight technology is an integral aspect in many of our initiatives, as it strengthens access to the legal system – a perspective mentioned by Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim. We are taking steps in this direction. I will, in a short while, mention how we are using technology to optimise state land.

At this juncture, I will share our intention to make clear that legal acts and instruments, such as statutory declarations and notarisations, can be done remotely through video-conferencing and electronic signing. We will introduce legislation, in due course. This will provide greater convenience to lawyers and their clients.

Lastly, I would like to address two points.

Mr Patrick Tay touched on workers of insolvent companies. This issue has been addressed on numerous occasions in this House. Exposure to business risks is something all companies face. When these risks eventuate and a company gets into trouble, a restructuring aims to provide the company space to recover. The Court supervises the restructuring process to balance the interests of the various stakeholders, including employees. If the company is successfully rehabilitated, workers are more likely to hold on to their jobs.

If the restructuring is unsuccessful and the company enters into insolvent winding up, section 203 of the Insolvency, Restructuring and Dissolution Act gives priority to certain claims. Out of the nine categories of claims under section 203, five categories give priority to workers. The only categories with priority over worker claims are the costs and expenses of winding up. These are necessary for the winding up to proceed smoothly. In fact, worker claims rank above claims by the Government, in respect of tax assessed and goods and services tax due.

Mr Tay highlights insolvent companies having insufficient assets to pay workers even with the statutory priority scheme, and difficulties faced by workers in dealing with judicial managers. Mr Tay has previously suggested that MOM could advance monies to workers and, thereafter, stand in their place as a preferred creditor.

This proposal was not adopted because while it may provide short-term relief to workers, it may lead to a bigger systemic problem in the long term by causing market distortion and more defaults on salary payments, in the expectation of public funds being deployed.

That said, lower wage workers with unpaid salaries may receive financial assistance from the Short-term Relief Fund and the Migrant Workers' Assistance Fund. Such assistance is also available where companies are not insolvent.

Finally, judicial managers must deal with multiple considerations and balance competing interests. Marshalling and allocating resources, including to employees to keep the business going, would depend very much on the specific facts and circumstances.

Mr Pillai asked about Singapore's planned accession to the Hague Service Convention. I am pleased to update that we have been actively working on amendments to the relevant pieces of legislation to give effect to our obligations under the Convention. We aim to introduce the amendments by the fourth quarter this year, at the same time when the Convention enters into force for Singapore.

7.15 pm

Lastly, I move to our initiatives to optimise land use and related matters.

At the outset, we are focused on helping Singapore and its people. With our limited land, we need to constantly innovate. This is not innovating for its own sake, but with the goal of improving the quality of lives and building vibrant spaces and communities.

We are, thus, pressing ahead on the digitalisation of the conveyancing process, evolution and mainstreaming of geospatial technologies, and rejuvenation of state lands.

We have embarked on, in my view, an exciting project – the Digital Conveyancing Portal, or DCP.

Many of us would have probably experienced the conveyancing process, which currently takes a rather manual approach. This will soon be a thing of the past as the SLA brings to fruition its vision of the DCP as a fully integrated, secure, efficient, transparent and paperless process.

The DCP will include the facilitation of e-payments and digital signing of documents. Users will also be able to retrieve details and check for updates with greater ease.

Mr Lim Biow Chuan has raised the point on potential fraud. This is something that SLA will consider in its design and implementation of the DCP. In terms of security, SLA will put in place robust data and cybersecurity measures, including data encryption and active monitoring of data access to detect any suspicious online activity.

Besides benefiting buyers and sellers, the DCP will make it more efficient for those involved in the conveyancing process. This will be a tool that assists lawyers, financial institutions, real estate agents and developers.

Responding to Mr Zhulkarnain, SLA had extensively engaged stakeholders since 2019 and will continue to do so at each stage of the DCP's development to ensure that the end product meets the needs of all parties. SLA will continue to raise awareness on the use and benefits of the DCP through these engagements.

We announced in January that we have appointed the vendor for the development of the DCP. We target to implement the first phase, which will comprise the Option to Purchase stage for developer sale, resale and sub-sale transactions, by 2024. We are working towards full implementation by 2026.

Mr Lim and Mr Zhulkarnain asked about the DCP's potential impact on jobs.

We expect most individuals will continue to engage lawyers. Given the high value nature of property transactions, this serves as a safeguard of the individual's interests.

Nevertheless, such digitalisation projects will naturally, over time, result in less emphasis being placed on certain processes or skillsets. The development brings value to the larger community by making processes simpler and faster. Hence, we encourage conveyancing practices to adapt to, innovate and leverage on the DCP to deliver better service to their clients.

Mdm Chairperson, I see that I am running out of time. I have a last section and would gratefully request for your indulgence for a bit more.

The Chairman: Please take a few minutes to round up.

Ms Rahayu Mahzam: Geospatial technology has transformative potential on the way we live, work and play. This can unlock opportunities to benefit businesses and citizens and enable sustainability efforts.

Prof Koh Lian Pin will be happy to hear that SLA has been actively engaging the industry, institutions and community to mainstream the use of geospatial capabilities, promote greater awareness and understanding of their potential.

Last year, SLA signed Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with key real estate and industry players, such as the Real Estate Developers' Association of Singapore, Singapore Business Federation and real estate agencies. Through these MOUs, geospatial data and platforms, including OneMap, will be leveraged to benefit their members and customers. These include enhancing building design, operations and maintenance.

In the science and environment community, SLA started partnerships with various agencies to deepen the use of geospatial data for weather monitoring, coastal protection, flood mitigation, carbon-sink estimation and climate studies.

SLA will also be exploring how geospatial elements can be introduced in the education curriculum. One such initiative is the Global Navigation Satellite Systems Innovation Challenge.

With our limited land, it is integral that we continue to find creative ways to optimise our space in a sustainable manner to meet the needs of our community and economic demand.

We thank Mr Cheng Hsing Yao for suggesting an overarching plan for the interim use of state land. We will explore this with relevant agencies.

For 2022, we partnered with stakeholders and the public to enhance various State lands and properties, such as the rejuvenation of Gillman Barracks and the development of a new three-generation park at Yarrow Gardens.

This year, SLA will continue to rejuvenate State-owned properties. Let me address some of the comments made by Mr Christopher de Souza, Ms Nadia Ahmad Samdin and Mr Lim Biow Chuan.

First, SLA has identified the former Kampong Eunos Community Centre at 10 Kampong Eunos to be repurposed as a creative accelerator and innovation studio for the youth community. SLA will work with VIVITA Singapore, a social impact organisation that seeks to empower children and youths to be changemakers for the future.

Through SLA's sustained efforts over the years, we have developed the Dempsey cluster into a lifestyle destination and a place for communities to gather. And to retain its attractiveness, SLA improved the infrastructure to make it better.

SLA and Sport Singapore launched a tender for a playfield to offer more spaces for the community to bond through sports. SLA will continue to enhance Dempsey and expand it into a sustainable lifestyle destination that has many offerings. Innovative concepts and sustainability initiatives will be introduced to complement the current diverse mix of lifestyle activities.

Even as SLA rolls out new plans, we must balance the impact on nature and the environment – a point raised by Ms Nadia Samdin.

SLA is cognisant of the need for this balance and has upheld the rustic nature of the Southern Islands and, in general, only low-intensity development has been carried out. SLA works with various agencies, including National Parks Board (NParks), to safeguard the biodiversity and heritage of the lands even as interest and the number of visitors grows.

The Chairman: Senior Parliamentary Secretary, I will have to ask you to round up.

Ms Rahayu Mahzam: Yes. In conclusion, whilst we have a diverse slate of initiatives, these are united by the thread of bettering the lives of people in Singapore and advancing our economy and society through laws and policies. Thank you, Madam.

The Chairman: We have a few minutes for clarification. I am going to remind Members we only have a few minutes, so please be succinct. Otherwise, we cannot take too many questions, and the Minister and the Senior Parliamentary Secretary cannot respond. Okay? Mr Dennis Tan.

Mr Dennis Tan Lip Fong: Thank you, Mdm Chairperson. Just a quick question for the Minister. Can I ask the Minister to elaborate more on the three categories of the cases eligible for mandatory mediation?

Mr Edwin Tong Chun Fai: It is as I said. Usually, it is the nature or the cases that are most appropriate.

Our studies have shown that the vast majority of neighbourly disputes result from noise. So, that would be one category of cases that we would like to put through mediation.

I also mentioned re-mediation, in the event that cases which had previously gone to mediation but were not successful in maintaining the mediated position for a period of time, and new issues arise related to the mediated agreement. The CMC can re-mediate those.

We also intend to make mediation the first port of call – something that will be required before a party can bring a case to the CDRT. The reason for this is because, as I mentioned earlier, we want to drive the parties' behaviour towards mediation. The best thing to do is to say that you should not be using CDRT resources, which really should be reserved as a measure of last resort, without trying the mediation process first.

Those are broadly the three categories. We will, in the context of shaping the framework, be more specific about how they will be implemented in conjunction with the specific rules for mediation, and also the CDRT process and the rules for filing a CDRT claim.

The Chairman: Ms Nadia Samdin.

Ms Nadia Ahmad Samdin: Thank you, Mdm Chair. I thank the hon Minister and Senior Parliamentary Secretary for their speeches. Just two clarifications.

The deferment of the admission regime changes from 2023 to 2024 has caused some junior lawyers and law graduates some anxiety. Just two questions.

Firstly, could the Minister elaborate on the reasons for this deferment? For example, is it due to an urgent need for young lawyers to be called? Secondly, as I understand, MinLaw will release more information shortly. Is there a rough indication of when that might be?

My second clarification to Senior Parliamentary Secretary is on the Southern Islands. Thank you very much for sharing that. In the foreseeable future and the year ahead, is there any planned development for the Southern Islands?

Mr Edwin Tong Chun Fai: I want to assure Ms Nadia Samdin that it is not because there is a sudden, urgent need to have lawyers quickly qualify and, therefore, we deferred the programme, which is from a six-month training period to a one-year training period.

The reason for that is, as I explained in my speech, we have had COVID-19 for the past two and a half years or so. I think as we begin to open up, the firm processes for working from home and arrangements with the supervision of their trainees have been re-adjusted.

So, we thought, given feedback from the firms, that it is better to let these practices settle because the way in which trainees work in the firms, how they interact with their seniors, with their mentors, with the senior lawyers, is going to be a key part of that training and a key part of that expansion of the one year.

We wanted to let these new post-COVID-19 work processes settle before we implement the changes.

As to when it will come onstream, it will be shortly – certainly, ahead of time and in good time for the trainees to be kept informed of the timeline and the arrangements.

But really, there is no change in the regime at all. It is what the CPTL had recommended in terms of why one year and what that one year ought to comprise. It is just that the process will now kickstart in 2024 instead of 2023.

Ms Rahayu Mahzam: Thank you, Ms Nadia Samdin. At this juncture, we are balancing the needs and if there are any further developments, we will make the announcement accordingly.

But I would like to assure you that even as we are rolling out new plans, we are very conscious of taking necessary measures to make sure that we are protecting the environment. This includes safeguarding areas for conservation and research activities, like the Small Sister's Island; and areas for public recreation, such as lodges, campsites and beaches at St John's Island, Lazarus Island and Pulau Hantu.

The Chairman: Dr Tan Wu Meng.

Dr Tan Wu Meng: I thank the Minister and Senior Parliamentary Secretary for recognising the importance of the last mile and the journey of fellow Singaporeans, in particular, litigants-in-person, self-represented persons.

Can the Ministry assure us that even as there are new measures which are digital, which are online, that these processors will remain accessible to older Singaporeans who may not be as English literate as their younger counterparts?

Ms Rahayu Mahzam: Thank you, Dr Tan, for raising that point. I can appreciate that that is of concern to that generation. But as I mentioned earlier, there are actually many different avenues of support. Not only are they online, they are also available at the Courts and also in the vernacular – that may be something that is better for the elderly.

We also have the support available to give legal advice and assistance, also, within the community. So, I hope that people in the community can leverage on those services as well.

The Chairman: Mr Murali, do you wish to withdraw your amendment?

Mr Murali Pillai: Mdm Chairperson, briefly, I would like to thank the hon Members who filed cuts for Head R's Estimates.

I would like to thank the hon Second Minister and the hon Senior Parliamentary Secretary for their responses, which she went into using a football terminology, went to extra time. But nonetheless, their plans for 2023 are clearly spelled out. I wish them well – as well as their colleagues in MinLaw – in really pursuing the mission of providing access to justice and maintaining the rule of law. With that, Mdm Chairperson, I would like to withdraw my amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

The sum of \$299,061,900 for Head R ordered to stand part of the Main Estimates.

The sum of \$52,503,200 for Head R ordered to stand part of the Development Estimates.

COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY – HEAD E (JUDICATURE)

(A safe and secure nation in turbulent times)

The Chairman: Head E, Judicature. Ms Sylvia Lim.

Tenure of Supreme Court Judges

Ms Sylvia Lim (Aljunied): Madam, I beg to move, "That the total sum allocated for Head E of the Estimates be reduced by \$100."

Madam, the Government regularly emphasises that Singapore holds fast to the rule of law. One of the fundamentals of the rule of law is that the Government and Parliament should be subject to being scrutinised and checked by an independent judiciary.

What is the measure of judicial independence? One key aspect is that when Judges are appointed, they must have security of tenure, meaning that they cannot be removed from office until they reach a certain age or, in some countries, until they die. Such security assures Judges and the public they serve that cases are decided according to the law, fearlessly and without favour.

7.30 pm

Under our Constitution, Article 98 protects the security of tenure of Supreme Court Judges till the age of 65 years. Article 98 provides, among other things, that the office of a Supreme Court Judge must not be abolished during the Judges' continuance in office and that the terms of appointment, including remuneration, shall not be altered to the Judges' disadvantage after his appointment.

Madam, I wish to make a call today to raise the age when tenure ends from 65 to 70 years. The call I am making is not new. So, why am I bringing this up again today?

Madam, I find that in my interactions with members of the Bar and legal fraternity, there is support for raising the age of tenure of Judges to 70 for two key reasons.

First, such an extension of security of the tenure was preferable to the current practice of reemploying Judges reaching 65 on short-term contracts. This observation which I share is purely from a system design perspective and not a comment on the actual behaviour of any Judge.

Secondly, there was a sense that when Judges retired too early, this was a real loss to the nation. The suggestion to move the age when tenure ends from 65 to 70 years is actually a very modest one, if one looks at how life expectancy in Singapore has changed over the decades. The current retirement age of 65 years was introduced way back in 1969, more than half a century ago, when the life expectancy in Singapore was 67.6 years. Just consider that – in 1969, a Judge retiring at 65 years then, statistically had just a few more years to live. Today, our life expectancy has drastically increased to 84 years.

The situation elsewhere is also worth noting. In Australia and New Zealand, the retirement age of Judges is 70. In the United Kingdom (UK), the age of retirement for Judges was recently increased from 70 to 75 years, just two years ago, with the reason cited that raising the retirement age would mean that the Judges' invaluable experience could be retained. The same can be said for our Judges in Singapore.

We last discussed this issue in the House three years ago, in the course of a debate on Bills that restructured the courts. During that debate, several Members of Parliament, including myself, raised the topic of the tenure of Supreme Court Judges. I argued then for the extension of the retirement age to 70, from a manpower utilisation perspective and in the context of Singaporeans having better health and living longer.

In his round-up speech at that time, then-Senior Minister of State Edwin Tong basically said – and here I am paraphrasing – that our system should be judged by outcomes and "if it ain't broke, why fix it?"

He highlighted that public trust in our judicial system was high, while in some other countries with higher retirement ages, judicial morale was low. However, with due respect, this does not address specifically why an extension of the age when tenure ends was neither feasible nor beneficial.

In fact, Minister Tong himself stated, in the course of the debate, that the security of tenure for a Supreme Court Judge seeks to secure the independence of the Judge in judicial proceedings. Therefore, would an extension from 65 to 70 years not be better from that perspective?

Madam, to have Judges re-employed beyond 65 on short-term contracts leaves room for speculation that a sitting Judge may be influenced by the need for renewal at the end of his tenure at 65. Judges aged 65 should continue to enjoy security of tenure and retire for good at 70.

Question proposed.

The Chairman: Minister Edwin Tong.

The Second Minister for Law (Mr Edwin Tong Chun Fai): Mdm Chairperson, as Ms Lim has noted, the tenure of Supreme Court Judges is a matter that has been discussed in this House on several occasions – back in 2014 as well, and most recently, in 2019, when we had the debate, I think on a Bill in relation to the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court.

What is important is that the system must work well as a whole and be relevant and suited to our own local context. The retirement age for Judges should not be slavishly copied from other countries and jurisdictions; they have their own considerations. In any case, when you do a survey, there is also no fixed or uniform practice across the world. There are jurisdictions other than Singapore, where Judges also have tenure until the age of 65. There are also jurisdictions where Judges have tenure until 70, or for life. Each jurisdiction decides what works best for their own specific outcomes and their own local context.

In Singapore, coming onto the Supreme Court Bench is often a second career. Most, if not all, of our Supreme Court Judges are lawyers who have distinguished themselves in private practice, public service or academia, before accepting an appointment onto the Bench.

From the time of appointment to the time a Judge reaches the age of 65, most Judges would have spent an average of about 15 years on the Bench. It is appropriate at that time, for a Judge to consider what his or her continued contributions should be and how that is best carried out.

Some might feel that they are able to make a valuable contribution for a while more – and if so, they can discuss a further appointment with the Chief Justice. Some might prefer to take a step back and only hear cases when rostered according to their own availability – and if so, an appointment as a Senior Judge may be suitable. Others may prefer to retire altogether and spend the next phase of their life on other

endeavours.

Ms Lim refers to this as a loss to the nation. I think this system provides for there to be flexibility to deal with the specific individual and his or her specific preferences. And I think it is in this way that, in fact, we retain their legal talent. And as I have mentioned, most, if not all, of the practitioners, from practice or from academia, who are appointed as Supreme Court Judges have distinguished themselves in their previous practice.

Apart from this, the retirement age of 65 – as well as the framework for re-appointment, or the appointment of Senior Judges – allows us to strike a good balance between various factors at play here, including providing younger Judges with the opportunity to advance, whilst retaining the experience of the older generation; and also allowing for calibrations to be made to the composition of the Bench from time to time, in consideration of whether the Bench has the right mix of different skillsets in various different legal disciplines, to meet the evolving justice needs of society.

The current system, the one that we have, that is practiced, takes into account all of these specific circumstances. It has worked well for us. And as I have said, it gives us the flexibility and allows us to take into account the specific wishes of each of the Judges when they reach age 65.

The Chairman: Ms Sylvia Lim.

Ms Sylvia Lim: Thank you, Madam. I have two clarifications for Minister. Minister, last November, the Chief Justice revealed in a speech he made at the Supreme Court that when a Judge approached 65 years of age, he would ordinarily be offered an extension to continue in office till the age of 68. So, my question is, if this is ordinarily being offered to Judges upon reaching 65, why not simply extend the retirement age to 70, since "ordinarily", there will be an extension of the term of office?

The second clarification is that he mentioned that some Judges might want to leave the Court at 65, they may have other plans and so on. But is it not possible to design the system such that the tenure ends at 70, but Judges can have the election of retiring at 65 – I mean at their election?

Mr Edwin Tong Chun Fai: On the latter point, it is really a question of whether you decide to fix it at 65 or 70. We have chosen 65. As I have said, by that time, most, if not all, of the Judges, have spent at least – on average – about 15 years on the Bench. So, the further extensions in the different forms that I have outlined, gives them the choice.

On Ms Lim's first point, the Chief Justice says that when a Judge reaches 65, he is ordinarily offered an extension up to 68. But that is not the same as mandating that. So, ordinarily offered does not mean that in all these cases, it is accepted. There is still an option for a Judge to take one or more of the routes that I have indicated, such as being appointed as a Senior Judge instead, or perhaps taking on a case, depending on his or her preference on the caseload schedule.

The Chairman: Ms Sylvia Lim, do you wish to withdraw your amendment?

Ms Sylvia Lim: Madam, I do believe that this discussion should continue, but in the interest of time, I beg leave to withdraw my amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

The sum of \$357,286,100 for Head E ordered to stand part of the Main Estimates.

The sum of \$70,333,900 for Head E ordered to stand part of the Development Estimates.

COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY REPORTING PROGRESS

7.40 pm

The Leader of the House (Ms Indranee Rajah): Mdm Chairperson, may I seek your consent to move that progress be reported now and leave be asked to sit again tomorrow?

The Chairman: I give my consent.

Resolved, "That progress be reported now and leave be asked to sit again tomorrow." [Ms Indranee Rajah].

Thereupon Mdm Deputy Speaker left the Chair of the Committee and took the Chair of the House.

Ms Indranee Rajah: Mdm Deputy Speaker, I beg to report that the Committee of Supply has made progress on the Estimates of Expenditure for the financial year 2023/2024 and ask leave to sit again tomorrow.

Mdm Deputy Speaker: So be it. I believe there is a clarification by Minister of State Mr Muhammad Faishal.

CLARIFICATION BY MINISTER OF STATE FOR HOME AFFAIRS

7.42 pm

The Minister of State for Home Affairs (Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim): Thank you for allowing me to make a clarification.

With regard to my reply, to the supplementary question asked by Mr Dennis Tan during the Oral reply for Parliamentary Question No 1 at the Sitting of 24 February 2023, I mentioned that there will be a Coroner's inquiry and that it will be public information. [*Please refer to "Inquiry into Death of SCDF NSF Firefighter in December 2022", Official Report, 24 February 2023, Vol 95, Issue 86, Oral Answers to Questions section.*]

I should clarify that the State Coroner may decide to hold a Coroner's inquiry, as I had previously shared in January. It will be held in open Court and it will be public information, unless the Coroner has sufficient reason not to do so.

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved, "That Parliament do now adjourn to tomorrow." – [Ms Indranee Rajah].

Adjourned accordingly at 7.43 pm.

WRITTEN ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

REASONS FOR UNSUCCESSFUL APPLICATIONS FOR LONG-TERM VISIT PASSES, PERMANENT RESIDENCY AND SINGAPORE CITIZENSHIP

1 **Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang** asked the Minister for Home Affairs (a) whether the Ministry will consider including the reasons for rejection in letters issued to unsuccessful applicants for (i) Long-Term Visit Pass, (ii) Long-Term Visit Pass Plus, (iii) permanent residence and (iv) Singapore Citizenship so as to provide the next steps for the applicants; and (b) if the Ministry will not be doing so, why not.

Mr K Shanmugam: The Immigration and Checkpoints Authority, generally, does not disclose the reasons for unsuccessful applications for immigration facilities. This had been explained in Parliament previously in 2016, 2018 and 2021.

CENTRAL FIRE ALARM SYSTEM FOR ALL HDB BLOCKS

2 **Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang** asked the Minister for Home Affairs (a) whether the Ministry will consider installing a central fire alarm system for all HDB blocks; and (b) if not, why not.

Mr K Shanmugam: Central fire alarm systems, as opposed to standalone smoke detector systems, provide early warning to all occupants within a building in the event of a fire, in order to facilitate mass evacuation.

The Housing and Development Board (HDB) blocks are designed such that each HDB flat is a fire compartment. Any fire outbreak within an HDB flat is usually contained within that flat and there has usually been no need to evacuate all residents from the block. Residents from adjacent flats are sometimes evacuated.

Since June 2018, we have also required all new residential units, and existing residential units undergoing works which impact fire safety, to install Home Fire Alarm Devices. These are standalone smoke detectors that provide early warning of a fire to the occupants of the affected unit.

UPDATE ON PROPOSED FLYING TAXI SERVICE SINCE JOINT TRIAL IN 2019

3 **Mr Leon Perera** asked the Minister for Trade and Industry (a) whether he can provide an update on the proposed flying taxi service since the joint trial in 2019; (b) what is the expected initial capacity for such a service in terms of number of trips per day; and (c) what is the expected number of jobs this industry will create over the next five years.

Mr Gan Kim Yong: We have made progress in growing the Advanced Air Mobility (AAM) ecosystem in Singapore since Volocopter first flew its prototype Electric Vertical Take Off and Landing (eVTOL) aircraft, or "air taxi" over Marina Bay in 2019. In particular, we are pursuing initiatives in research and development, commercialisation, manufacturing and maintenance, repair and overhaul of eVTOL aircraft. We are also exploring the feasibility of a piloted eVTOL aircraft commercial trial in Singapore. The capacity of such services and the number of jobs created will depend on the specific operating models, which are still under development.

PLANS FOR WASTE DISPOSAL AFTER SEMAKAU LANDFILL IS FULLY FILLED

4 **Mr Leon Perera** asked the Minister for Sustainability and the Environment (a) whether there are plans for waste disposal after the Semakau Landfill is fully filled; and (b) what are the projected construction costs and dates of completion of new landfills.

Ms Grace Fu Hai Yien: Ongoing efforts are being made to reduce the waste to be sent to Semakau Landfill, thereby extending the lifespan of the landfill well beyond 2035. Under our Zero Waste Master Plan, we have mapped out a range of initiatives to reduce waste generation and improve recycling rates, to reduce the amount of waste sent to the landfill by 30% per capita per day by 2030. These include research and development, regulatory measures, as well as outreach and public engagement.

My Ministry and the National Environment Agency are assessing the results of these ongoing efforts, as well as future plans and will provide an update when ready.

TAKE-UP OF FULL TWO WEEKS OF GOVERNMENT-PAID PATERNITY LEAVE BY ELIGIBLE FATHERS

5 **Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang** asked the Minister for Social and Family Development in each of the past five years (a) what is the number and percentage of eligible fathers who have taken the full two weeks of Government-Paid Paternity Leave (GPPL); and (b) what is the median number of days of GPPL taken by eligible fathers.

Mr Masagos Zulkifli B M M: From 2018 to 2020, about 40% of eligible fathers took the full two weeks of Government-Paid Paternity Leave (GPPL) in each year. This amounted to around 13,000 fathers in 2018 and 2019, and over 12,000 fathers in 2020. Data for 2021 and 2022 are not available as parents have up to one year after their Singaporean child's birth to consume the leave, and employers or self-employed persons have three months after that to submit the claims. The statistics exclude eligible fathers who may have consumed the leave but did not submit any claims.

From 2018 to 2020, the median GPPL taken by eligible fathers increased from 0.8 weeks to 1.2 weeks. It is more meaningful to report in weeks rather than in days, as each individual may have a different number of working days in a week.

PUBLICATION OF FINDINGS OF INVESTIGATION INTO INDIVIDUAL ALLEGEDLY PROMULGATING DEVIANT TEACHINGS

6 Mr Muhamad Faisal Bin Abdul Manap asked the Minister for Social and Family Development and Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs whether the Ministry will make public the findings of the Police investigation into an individual allegedly promulgating deviant teachings, upon its completion.

Mr Masagos Zulkifli B M M: The authorities will share its findings with the public after the Police investigations are completed.

The Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) urges the community to seek religious guidance only from credible sources and asatizahs registered under the Asatizah Recognition Scheme. At the same time, MUIS will continue to provide religious guidance and advice to the community on the dangers of deviant teachings.

DENTISTS SPECIALISING IN GERIATRIC DENTAL SERVICES IN PUBLIC HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

7 Mr Leong Mun Wai asked the Minister for Health (a) what is the current number of dentists specialising in geriatric dental services in the public healthcare system; and (b) what are the plans to improve the accessibility and availability of geriatric dental services by 2030 in light of the ageing population in Singapore.

Mr Ong Ye Kung: The majority of dental needs of geriatric patients can be met by general dentists at the polyclinics, Community Health Assist Scheme clinics and private dental clinics. Seniors with more complex needs or with medical conditions can be cared for by specialists at the two national dental centres, National Dental Centre and National University Centre for Oral Health, and hospital dental clinics. There are, currently, 12 dentists with specialised training in geriatric dentistry and another five in training.

Our dental school currently provides geriatric dentistry teaching in the undergraduate curriculum and a postgraduate training programme to give dentists a better understanding of the needs of geriatric patients.

COST SAVINGS FROM REMOVING REWARD MILESTONES IN NATIONAL STEPS CHALLENGE FOR CLOCKING DAILY CUMULATIVE STEPS

8 Mr Leong Mun Wai asked the Minister for Health (a) what are the estimated cost savings to the Government from removing the reward milestones in the National Steps Challenge for clocking 7,500 and 10,000 daily cumulative steps; and (b) how do the cost savings compare against the potential cost to the individual caused by a more sedentary lifestyle due to the removal of the reward milestones.

Mr Ong Ye Kung: The Health Promotion Board (HPB) is spending more on promoting physical activity, by significantly expanding the number of physical activities in the community. It hopes to increase our activity outreach from 31,000 to 47,000 participants a week.

However, with greater outreach to benefit more people, HPB has to concurrently lower the maximum Healthpoints that an individual can earn in the National Steps Challenge, given the limit to our resources. Our experience is that whether participants are clocking 5,000, 7,500 or 10,000 steps a day, they are already inculcating a habit of staying active, with potentially minimal influence from Healthpoints.

INCLUSION OF GENERIC EMTRICITABINE AND TENOFOVIR DISOPROXIL FUMARATE IN STANDARD DRUGS LIST

9 Mr Leong Mun Wai asked the Minister for Health whether any study has been done on the feasibility of including generic emtricitabine and tenofovir disoproxil fumarate for pre-exposure prophylaxis and post-exposure prophylaxis onto the Standard Drugs List for the prevention of HIV transmission.

Mr Ong Ye Kung: The Ministry of Health regularly reviews the Subsidised Drugs List (SDL) and coverage of the Medication Assistance Fund (MAF) to ensure that commonly used drugs are affordable.

Currently, there are 17 anti-retroviral drugs in SDL or MAF, including emtricitabine and tenofovir disoproxil fumarate, for use as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) treatment, but not for pre-exposure prophylaxis in adults.

In Singapore, pre- and post-exposure prophylaxis usage is supplementary HIV preventive options for individuals, as they are not fully effective and do not protect against other sexually transmitted infections. They should be very careful and avoid sending the wrong signal that these drugs can substitute the recommended HIV prevention methods, such as avoiding casual sex and correct use of condoms.

DEATHS ATTRIBUTABLE TO SECOND-HAND SMOKE IN RECENT YEARS

10 Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang asked the Minister for Health what is the number of deaths in Singapore that are attributable to second-hand smoke in 2020, 2021 and 2022.

Mr Ong Ye Kung: There is no direct data on deaths caused by second-hand smoke. Deaths attributable to second-hand smoke are usually estimates based on modelling studies. The Global Burden of Disease 2019 study estimated the annual deaths attributable to second-hand smoke for Singapore to be 296 in 2019.

DOG DEATHS AT DOG FARMS AND PET SHOPS AND TOP THREE CAUSES

11 **Mr Louis Ng Kok Kwang** asked the Minister for National Development (a) for each year since 2019, how many dogs have died while licensed to (i) dog farms and (ii) pet shops; (b) what are the top three causes of death of dogs in these premises, respectively; and (c) whether the Ministry will require these premises to report the causes of death if they are not doing so.

Mr Desmond Lee: The number of dogs reported to have died at dog farms and pet shops since 2019 is in Table 1. The majority of the dogs in these premises died of chronic diseases, such as cancer, kidney disease and diabetes.

Table 1: Number of Dogs that Died at Dog Farms and Pet Shops

Year	Dog Farms	Pet Shops
2019	134	14
2020	188	25
2021	546	24
2022	221	28

In April 2022, the National Parks Board (NParks) enhanced its licensing conditions for pet boarders and breeders, to safeguard animal health and welfare. As part of the enhanced licensing conditions, dog farms are required to provide information on the cause of death of dogs under their care. NParks is considering extending this requirement to pet shops.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT VOUCHERS DISBURSED WITH LETTERS BEARING LETTERHEADS OF CITIZENS' CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEES

12 **Mr Leong Mun Wai** asked the Minister for Culture, Community and Youth (a) why are Public Transport Vouchers disbursed on letters bearing the letterheads of Citizens' Consultative Committees (CCCs); (b) what other Government transfer payments, such as one-time payouts, support schemes, awards or bursaries, are disbursed through the CCCs or other grassroots organisations (GROs); and (c) what is the role of the grassroots adviser in the disbursement of such Government transfer payments via the CCCs or GROs.

Mr Edwin Tong Chun Fai: Grassroots Organisations (GROs), including Citizens' Consultative Committees (CCCs), promote social cohesion through various community bonding activities. They also raise awareness of and help administer Government programmes, including in last-mile delivery to support our population. The Grassroots Advisers (GRAs) guide the GROs in these engagement and outreach efforts. The GRAs and GROs may also directly assist needy households by leveraging a range of Government and local assistance schemes, such as the CCC ComCare Fund.

In the case of Public Transport Vouchers (PTVs), the Government taps on the GROs to notify eligible households to claim their PTVs at public transport nodes. Through their networks in the community, GROs also play an important role to help raise awareness of and help administer the PTV programme. GROs also assess applications for PTVs from needy households who marginally miss the eligibility criteria or who might require additional PTVs.

USE OF OFFICIAL NAMES FOR PUBLIC HOLIDAYS IN PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS

13 **Mr Leong Mun Wai** asked the Minister for Manpower in view of the vandalism of the Lunar New Year display at Nanyang Technological University, whether the Government will consider issuing guidelines on the use of official names for public holidays in public communications.

Dr Tan See Leng: The names of our public holidays are well established and understood. Therefore, there is no need for guidelines.

ANNEX

Annex 1()

VERNACULAR SPEECHES

Vernacular Speech by Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim()

Vernacular Speech by Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim()

Vernacular Speech by Mrs Josephine Teo()

Vernacular Speech by Assoc Prof Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim()

Vernacular Speech by Ms Sun Xueling()

Vernacular Speech by Dr Mohamad Maliki Bin Osman()

Vernacular Speech by Ms Sim Ann()