PM Lee: Not possible to stop all determined cheats

Balance must be struck between more safeguards, too many checks

By **LEE U-WEN**

[SINGAPORE] Even as the government reviews and tightens its systems to ensure high standards of honesty are maintained, it is not possible for any system to be able to completely stop a determined cheat, said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

He added that it was important to strike a balance between instituting more safeguards – such as stricter procurement rules – and burdening the system with too many checks.

Mr Lee made these points at the 60th anniversary celebrations of the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) held at the Istana yesterday.

Among those in the 170-strong audience were former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong and Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean.

Mr Lee's comments come amid an ongoing corruption probe into a number of senior civil servants including the former chiefs of the Central Narcotics Bureau and the Singapore Civil Defence Force.

While he did not address any specific case in his 15-minute speech, he said that it was "bad" that some officers had failed to live up to the high standards that both the civil service and the people of Singapore expect of public servants.

"I'm confident that these lapses are not typical of the public service. The overwhelming majority of officers are upright and trustworthy," he said.

"The cases which have come up reflect our determination to clamp down on corruption and wrongdoing, even when it is embarrassing or awkward for the government."

In a separate statement yesterday, Mr Lee Kuan Yew noted that the latest cases being investigated were "new forms of corruption, with sex being exchanged for favourable outcomes".

"There is no end to human ingenuity," he said in a short statement issued to the media at the close of yesterday's ceremony.

Going back to when the East and South Asia region suffered from endemic corruption, Mr Lee said: "We set out in 1959 to be different. We strengthened the laws against corruption, gave CPIB officers more powers of interrogation and to seize documents.

"We introduced a fundamental change in the law on burden of proof that if a man possesses more assets than his known income, he is presumed to be corrupt and he must account for his assets beyond what he earns.

"We have succeeded in keeping Singapore clean and corruption free. This requires strong political will, constant vigilance and relentless efforts by CPIB to follow up every complaint and every clue of wrong doing."

Overall, however, Mr Lee Hsien Loong stressed that corruption in Singapore was "well under control", largely as a result of the CPIB's relentless efforts over the last six decades.

He noted how the number of complaints and cases registered have declined steadily in recent years, while the number of cases taken to court have also fallen.

Cases involving the government or public officers, he added, form only a "small proportion" of the total cases, and are not increasing either.

The prime minister highlighted four areas that have helped boost Singapore's reputation as a clean and incorrupt country.

These were a strong political leadership; enacting tough laws and enforcing them vigorously; keeping money out of politics; and paying public officers properly.

Still, he said that a clean system was "not a natural state of affairs", noting that some would still try to break the rules even with harsh penalties in place.

"Ultimately, the price of corruption is not just the dollar amount of the bribes, but the cost to society of the bad decisions and malfunctioning systems which far exceeds the money that is exchanged," said Mr Lee.

Yesterday's event also saw the launch of the CPIB's new coffee table book, chronicling the bureau's 60-year history of fighting corruption.

Mr Lee Kuan Yew presented signed copies of the 120-page hardcover book to three former CPIB directors as well as current director Eric Tan.