

Press Release

26.09.03

**COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD CONSIDERS INITIAL
REPORT OF SINGAPORE**

The Committee on the Rights of the Child today considered the initial report of Singapore on how that country was implementing the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Introducing the report, Chan Soo Sen, Minister of State at the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Community Development and Sports, said Singapore strongly supported the spirit and objectives of the Convention and shared the universal vision of a world that was safe, secure and nurturing of children.

Mr. Sen said that Singapore's accession to the Convention signalled its commitment to uphold the rights and best interests of children in the country. Singapore also sought to develop in its children a sense of their social responsibilities, as it believed that rights should be accompanied by civil responsibility; and the country had made significant progress in policies and services to further the well-being and development of its children.

The report was also introduced by Alfred Tan, Executive Director of the Singapore Children's Society, who said that his organization was committed to preventive, community and rehabilitative activities in collaboration with the Government.

Committee Experts, including Yanghee Lee, who acted as country rapporteur for the report of Singapore, queried the members of the Singaporean delegation on such issues as the reservations and declarations made by the State party upon its accession to the Convention; the status of children born of a Singaporean citizen and a foreign parent; the extent of use of corporal punishment on children in schools; the practice of female genital mutilation; the inclusion of human rights teachings in the educational curriculum; trafficking in persons; the State party's intention on ratifying the two Optional Protocols to the Convention; the integration of children with disabilities into the compulsory education scheme; and child abuse and neglect, among other things.

In preliminary remarks, Ms. Lee said that in view of the high-level delegation, there was a serious reason to believe that Singapore was fully committed to implementing the rights of the child. She suggested that the State party withdraw its reservations and declarations on the Convention; accede to the two Optional Protocols to the Convention; include human rights teachings in its educational curriculum; and provide funding for rights-based activities.

The Committee will issue its formal, written concluding observations and recommendations on the report of Singapore towards the end of its three-week session, which concludes on 3 October.

The delegation of Singapore was also composed of Yeoh Chee Yan, Deputy Secretary, Ang Bee Lian, Director of Social Welfare and Protection Division, Seah Yang Hee, Assistant Director, Rehabilitation and Protection Division, and Heng San San, Senior Child Welfare Officer, Rehabilitation and Protection Division, Ministry

of Community Development and Sports; Tang Tuck Weng, Director, Planning Division, Ministry of Education; Anthony Tan, Deputy Director, Policy and Operations Division, Ministry of Home Affairs; Frances Chia Mei Ling, Head, School Health Service Division, Ministry of Health; and Sharon Ong, State Counsel, Attorney-General's Chambers.

As one of the 192 States parties to the Convention, Singapore is obligated to present periodic reports to the Committee on its efforts to implement the provisions of the treaty.

When the Committee reconvenes at 10 a.m. on Monday, 29 September, it will hold a private meeting to discuss draft conclusions on country reports already considered this session. The next public meeting will take place at 10 a.m. on Tuesday, 30 September, when the Committee will take up the second periodic report of Bangladesh (CRC/C/65/Add.22).

Initial Report of Singapore

The report (CRC/C/51/Add.8) provides information on the efforts of the State party to implement the provisions of the Convention through administrative, legislative and juridical measures. It also gives details on the measures taken under the main subjects of general measures of implementation; definition of the child; general principles; civil rights and freedoms; family environment and alternative care; basic health and welfare; education, leisure and cultural activities; and special protection measures. It notes that out of the total resident population of 3.3 million in 1999, 22 per cent were children below 15 years, and 70 per cent were aged 15 to 64 years.

The report further notes that the total fertility rate in 1999 was 1,5 births per 1,000 females aged 15 to 44 years. Singapore's population policy encourages higher fertility to reverse the late marriage and childbearing trends by Singaporean couples. However, the total fertility rate is still below the replacement level of 2.1. It also says that Singapore has a relatively equitable distribution of income. There are no child beggars or children who have to live in the streets because of lack of housing. Singapore's GNP per capita in 1999 was \$ 22,918.

Although Singapore's legal system is predominantly based on common law, there is a small degree of legal pluralism and the application of certain aspects of Islamic personal law to members of the Muslim community, the report notes. Provisions for the protection of children are set out in a number of statutes: the Children and Young Persons Act, the Women's Charter, the Penal Code, the Adoption of Infants Act and the Guardianship of Infant Act. The Child and Young Persons Act was enacted in 1949 to provide for the welfare, care and protection of children and young persons as well as the treatment and rehabilitation of children and young persons who are beyond parental control or who have committed offences.

The report says that there are no special institutions or national machinery with the specific responsibility of overseeing the implementation of human rights. However, the Ministry of Community Development and Sports is the national focal point for the welfare and protection, rehabilitation and development of children. The Convention is implemented in Singapore via various relevant and subsidiary legislation.

Presentation of Report

CHAN SOO SEN, Minister of State at the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Community Development and Sports, said his country strongly supported the spirit and objectives of the Convention and shared the universal vision of a world that was safe, secure and nurturing of children. Singapore's accession to the Convention signalled its commitment to uphold the rights and best interests of children in the country. Singapore also sought to develop in its children a sense of their social responsibilities, as it believed that rights should be accompanied by civil responsibility.

Singapore had made significant progress in policies and services to further the well-being and development of its children, Mr. Sen said. That had been done not because of any international law, but because Singapore was a society which loved and valued children. As a nation without any natural resources, people were the only assets. The well-being of Singapore's children was the well-being of the society's future.

Mr. Sen said that when the State acceded to the Convention in 1995, much care was taken to examine its laws vis a vis the principles of the Convention. Its reservations and declarations were made in areas where they were required by the country's particular national circumstances and social context. There was a belief that one could best serve and safeguard the rights and interests of the child if the nation, community and family continued to grow in strength. However, Singapore's legal reservations in no way impeded vigorous and committed action on the part of the Government and society to ensure that the spirit and substance of the Convention was upheld, and the best interests of its children were served.

Every Singaporean mattered and children were particularly precious, Mr. Sen said. They were Singapore's future. Thus, the society sought to create an environment where the public, people and private sectors worked together to ensure their safety and well-being, and which offered them ample opportunities to develop their potential to the full. Singapore did not hesitate to invest in the development of children. During the current year, at least 2.1 per cent of Singapore's GDP was allocated for expenditure on programmes for children.

Mr. Sen said that the provision of affordable public housing was the first step to the eradication of child poverty. In Singapore, 86 per cent of the population today lived in public housing. The success of Singapore's housing programme had meant that children and young persons did not have to resort to the streets for shelter and face the attendant risks and problems. The country had also equal access to education for males and females of all races. Primary education was free for all Singaporean children and school attendance was close to 100 per cent. Among the best things the society of Singapore gave to its children was education.

ALFRED TAN, Executive Director of the Singapore Children's Society, said that his organization was committed to preventive, community and rehabilitative activities in collaboration with the Government. The preventive services included a national help line for children in distress, youth drop-in centres in secondary schools called project cabin and early intervention programme with primary schools for children at risk of

abuse. The Society provided family service support directly to low-income children and their families.

Discussion

YANGHEE LEE, the Committee Expert who served as country rapporteur for the report of Singapore, said that Singapore provided a high level of health care services to its people, including children. It was the one of the few countries without any external debt. Many non-governmental organizations enjoyed the support of the Government and they had expressed their satisfaction with their work in the country.

Ms. Lee said that the report had provided different age criteria for children for various purposes. However, children under 18 years should not be exploited in any manner. The principle of non-discrimination should be observed. The delegation had said that there was no discrimination in the country, but the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) had expressed concern about instances of discrimination against women, including the girl child. She asked why the State party did not ratify four other international human rights conventions. The reservations and declarations made by the State party on its accession to the Convention should be given thought with the view to withdrawing them.

IBRAHIM ABDUL AZIZ AL-SHEDDI, the Committee Experts who acted as country co-rapporteur for the report of Singapore, said he found the report to be interesting, and it was written in accordance with the guidelines of the Committee. He asked about the educational concerns of the Government for disabled children; and if the hotline put in place by the authorities to assist children was well known to all children. The report also lacked data on a number of areas concerning children.

Other Committee Experts also raised numerous questions under the main subjects of general measures of implementation; definition of the child; and general principles. The members of the Committee asked, among other things, about the existence of a national plan of action for children; the status of children born of a foreign parent; the reservations and declarations on the Convention; the extent of corporal punishment of children in schools; the age for custody proceeding; and the activities in publicizing the Convention and awareness increasing among parents.

Responding, the members of the Singaporean delegation said that the reservations and declarations made on the Convention were in accordance with the special circumstances of the society. Singapore believed that it could only accept the obligations that it could fulfil. Singapore considered that a child's rights as defined in the Convention, in particular the rights defined in articles 12 to 17, should be exercised with respect for the authority of parents, schools and other persons who were entrusted with the care of the child and in the best interests of the child. Concerning the reservations, the Constitution and the laws of Singapore provided adequate protection and fundamental rights and freedoms in the best interests of the child. The accession to the Convention did not imply the acceptance of obligations going beyond the limits prescribed by the Constitution or the acceptance of any obligation to introduce any right beyond those prescribed under the Constitution.

The delegation said that the employment legislation of Singapore prohibited the employment of children below 12 years old and gave special protection to working children between the ages of 12 years and 16 years; and Singapore reserved the right to apply article 32 subject to such employment legislation. Child labour was not a problem in the country, and the authorities did not find any infringement of the legislation on child labour.

With regard to article 28.1 (a) of the Convention, the delegation said that Singapore did not consider itself bound by the requirement to make primary education compulsory because such a measure was unnecessary in its social context where in practice virtually all children attended primary schools, and reserved the right to provide primary education free only to children who were citizens of Singapore. However, the Government continued to review its reservations periodically.

The minimum age of criminal responsibility was 7 years, the delegation said, adding that the State believed that care and protection of a child should start from the early age. Any court cases involving children were examined on camera.

The majority age for Singaporean children was 21 years, which was based on the common law concept, the delegation said; however, there were different ages applicable in a number of areas. Children could take part in political votes at the age of 21 years.

The Singaporean Constitution provided for citizenship by birth, descent and naturalization, the delegation said. Any persons, male or female, could have equal access to the naturalization process. Some of the laws on citizenship might be revised to cope with the process of globalization.

Any child wishing to lodge a complaint could do so either by calling or e-mailing the competent authorities, the delegation said. Hotlines were made available to children and their complaints received prompt responses from the authorities. Children could also send their grievances to newspapers, which normally published them.

Committee Experts continued to raise a number of questions under the main issues of family environment and alternative care; basic health and welfare; education, leisure and cultural activities; and special protection measures. They asked, among other things, about child canning in the family and in schools; the practice of female genital mutilation; the inclusion of human rights teaching in educational curriculum; trafficking in persons; the State party's intention to ratify the two Optional Protocols to the Convention; the integration of disabled children into the compulsory education scheme; and child abuse and neglect.

Responding, the delegation said that caring for children included prevention of child abuse. The safety and the best interest of a child could not be compromised either by parents or teachers. Child abuse was a serious matter to the Government and any acts of ill-treatment of a child were heavily repressed. However, slight canning might be used in very selective cases. The physical punishment might also be used on the palm of the hand against children who were known to misbehave. The community did not encourage the use of slight canning of children favouring other methods of disciplinary measures. No school personnel were allowed to use corporal punishment

against children, particularly against females; and only the headmaster might use slight canning in selective cases. Penal canning could be practiced against a young person residing in an institution with the superintendent attending.

Concerning pre-school education, the delegation said that the Government believed in quality education which was accessible to all, including low-income citizens. The Government had taken a series of measures to enable all school-age children to be integrated into the mainstream educational system. The main functions of pre-school activities were carried out by private and religious institutions, which worked in collaboration with the State. A special educational system had been introduced to assist physically handicapped children; the blind were provided with reading material in braille. The Government had put in place a monitoring mechanism to ensure that disabled children were involved in the compulsory schooling system.

Mothers were encouraged to breastfeed for a long time, the delegation said, adding that substitute milk was also made available. In many working places, breastfeeding facilities were provided.

With regard to female genital mutilation, the delegation said that circumcision was practiced within the society as part of Islamic tradition. The practice was not harmful to girls since only a piece of flesh was removed from the genital part leaving the essential ones. No harmful incident was reported to the authorities following the act of circumcision. There was no legal provision to criminalize acts of female genital mutilation.

In order to prevent obesity among the youth, a campaign for its control had been launched with recommendations for a balanced diet, the delegation said. There had been a campaign against the consumption of sweet drinks and foodstuff containing a high content of sugar. Children were advised to participate in physical training lessons as a preventive means against being overweight, which could be a source of sicknesses such as diabetes.

Child maintenance orders of Singapore were valid for all the Commonwealth countries, the delegation said. However, bilateral agreements had to exist with other countries for the maintenance order to be accepted by Singapore or vice versa.

Children in conflict with the law who were placed in institutions were provided with programmes aimed at integrating them into the society, their parents or extended families, the delegation said. There was a desire that the children under custody be integrated into the society after being rehabilitated in those institutions. When the offence by a youth was a serious one, the court might place him or her in a prison environment where a separate cell was provided within the adult prisons.

Preliminary Remarks

YANGHEE LEE, the Committee Expert who served as country rapporteur for the report of Singapore, said the dialogue was informative and the Committee was now better aware of the situation of children in Singapore. In view of the high-level delegation, there was a serious reason to believe that Singapore was fully committed to the implementation of the rights of the child. She said that the issue of canning had been highlighted during the discussion, and whatever the implication of 'canning',

corporal punishment was a degrading and harsh practice. She asked the delegation to disseminate the nature of today's dialogue upon returning home.

Ms. Lee suggested that the State party withdraw its reservations and declarations on the Convention; accede to the two Optional Protocols to the Convention; include human rights teachings in its educational curriculum; and provide funding for rights-based activities.

Concluding Remark by Delegation

CHAN SOO SEN, Minister of State at the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Community Development and Sports, said that Singapore could only accept obligations that it could abide by; and it had openly said that it could only accept what it could really accomplish. Concerning the reservations and declarations, Singapore had said sincerely that it accepted those provisions which the State could be able to implement. He said that he could not promise that those positions would be reviewed in the near future but the State would continue to do what it could.

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CRC Meeting Summary - Singapore.htm