



DebateIn 2Minutes

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's speech on proposed political changes on Wednesday drew both criticism – from opposition leader Low Thia Kiang – and praise yesterday. On the fourth day of debate on the President's Address, MPs also spoke on building a caring society and helping professionals, managers and executives (PMEs).

Continued support for anti-ISIS coalition

The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) will continue its support for the multinational coalition against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), as the threat posed by the militant group persists, said Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen.

He added that the SAF has deployed military personnel and equipment to help and will send its Imagery Analysis Team to the coalition's headquarters in Kuwait for another year.

More applying for LPA

A growing number of Singaporeans are appointing guardians to make key decisions on their behalf if they should lose their mental faculties, through a Lasting Power of Attorney (LPA).

Last year, 8,360 applications for the LPA were accepted, about 160 per cent more than in 2014, said Minister for Social and Family Development Tan Chuan-Jin.

Mr Seah Kian Peng (Marine Parade GRC) said the 20,000 LPAs accepted since the scheme began in 2010 was too few. Mr Tan said he would consider suggestions to raise awareness of the scheme.

Politics and political changes

Good politics should not just lead to good policies and prevent gridlock, but must also foster the growth of opposition parties, said Workers' Party leader Low Thia Kiang (Aljunied GRC) as he gave his take on the topic PM Lee touched on Wednesday.

Other MPs praised the proposed political changes Mr Lee announced, with Ms Rahayu Mahzam (Jurong GRC) saying that giving Non-Constituency MPs full voting rights will strengthen their position.

Mr Edwin Tong (Marine Parade GRC) defended the need for having the "most stringent conditions and criteria" for the Elected Presidency, given the weighty responsibilities of the office.

Focusing on the heart

Acting Minister for Education (Schools) Ng Chee Meng said fostering strong bonds among citizens will strengthen the "Singapore heartbeat" that powers the country.

Mr Ng, who is also Senior Minister of State for Transport, was among half a dozen MPs who spoke on community ties.

Ms Cheng Li Hui (Tampines GRC) proposed having integrated childcare and eldercare centres in schools and parks, while Ms Tin Pei Ling (MacPherson) suggested tapping networks of neighbours to support the elderly and young parents.

Ways to help PME and local workers

At least four MPs gave suggestions on helping Singapore workers, with Mr Patrick Tay (West Coast GRC) and Mr Saktiandi Supaat (Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC) focusing on PMEs. Mr Tay suggested pegging the number of foreign PMEs a firm can hire to the number of Singaporeans in the firm, in a "dependency ratio" similar to that for other work passes.

Ms Lee Bee Wah (Nee Soon GRC) and Mr Gan Thiam Poh (Ang Mo Kio GRC) suggested that for each Singaporean worker retrenched, firms should have their foreign worker quota reduced by one.

SAF to keep backing battle against ISIS

Multinational coalition has asked for the S'pore Imagery Analysis Team's continued help in fighting terror group

Jermyn Chow
Defence Correspondent

The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) will continue to send military personnel this year to support the multinational coalition battling the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), as the threat posed by the militant group persists.

The Imagery Analysis Team, sent to the Combined Joint Task Force Headquarters in Kuwait last September, will be deployed again this year, said Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen.

The coalition forces had asked for the team, whom they found useful as their first imagery analysis capability at the Kuwait headquarters, said Dr Ng.

The team provided "useful intelli-

gence support", allowing troops to identify terrorist infrastructure and facilities and avoid hitting civilian areas, he added.

Another reason the SAF is continuing its deployments is that ISIS is a long-term terrorism threat, he said. "By contributing to the international effort to tackle the threat at source, we are contributing directly to our own safety."

Dr Ng was replying to Mr Alex Yam (Marsiling-Yew Tee GRC), who asked how effective a role SAF played in the anti-ISIS coalition and whether Singapore's involvement will be expanded.

The defence minister said that as the fight evolves, Singapore will assess regularly the relevance and effectiveness of its contributions.

It will also work with partners to

see how best Singapore can contribute in ways "that are within our means and capabilities".

Singapore was the first South-east Asian nation to join the international fight against ISIS, sending a liaison officer to the United States Central Command Headquarters in December 2014. The SAF had also sent an intelligence planner to Kuwait in January last year.

It also supported air-to-air refuelling with its KC-135 tanker aircraft from last May to August, during which the plane flew 52 sorties and refuelled 142 coalition aircraft.

Many countries, including Malaysia, have also joined the coalition, Dr Ng said, as they recognise that citizens at home cannot be protected "unless the source of this radicalisation is disrupted".

The role of the Muslim community in combating extremism was also discussed. Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs Yaacob Ibrahim said policies exist to help manage

diversity and differences in faith within the Muslim community.

In his reply to Dr Fatimah Lateef (Marine Parade GRC), he cited the Singapore Muslim Identity project set up by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis). It lays out the desired characteristics of Muslim religious life in multiracial and multi-religious Singapore.

If the practices and ideologies of any group are found to be "fundamentally errant", Muis will issue a fatwa to pronounce what it finds objectionable and provide guidance to the Muslim community.

"There is no place for exclusivist and extremist doctrines," he added.

Groups like the Religious Rehabilitation Group also protect the Muslim community against radicalisation, said Dr Yaacob.

Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam said religious groups and foreign preachers who promote teachings that threaten the social fabric have no place in Singapore.

"Freedom of religion is guaranteed under our Constitution. But any religious group... that preaches values or promotes actions that are directly contrary to our social harmony, or threatens our safety, will be treated as a security risk," he said in his reply to Mr Yam. "The protocol is a very straightforward and transparent one... If his (preacher's) teachings are contrary to our values, he will be denied entry."

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Members of the Singapore Imagery Analysis Team at a multinational base in Afghanistan in 2014. The team has provided useful intelligence support to the multinational coalition fighting ISIS at its headquarters in Kuwait. MINDEF FILE PHOTO

ParliamentShorts

New Bill allows NEA to appoint auxiliary officers

The National Environment Agency (NEA) will be able to appoint auxiliary officers and give them certain enforcement powers under a new Bill introduced yesterday.

The National Environment Agency (Miscellaneous Amendments) Bill also gives NEA officers or employees more powers, allowing them to photograph or take a video of any offence under laws related to the environment.

14 cases of sexual misconduct by educators

Fourteen cases of sexual misconduct by educators in schools were reported to the police and prosecuted in the last five years, said Minister of State for Education Janil Puthucherry.

He added that any educator whose conduct raises "genuine concern", or who is found to have breached professional boundaries may be dismissed or redeployed to roles where they do not interact with students.

This is the case even when investigations are inconclusive, or when there is insufficient evidence to prosecute, said Dr Janil in response to Dr Lim Wee Kiak (Sembawang GRC), who asked what is being done to protect students when investigations do not lead to charges.

Educators who are under investigation are also suspended from the teaching service so that they are separated from students.

Private schools closely watched

Four private schools have been taken to court and six were ordered to close down for flouting regulations since the private education sector watchdog, the Council for Private Education (CPE), was set up in 2009.

Eight schools also did not meet the CPE's criteria for private education providers and had their application to renew their status denied. Acting Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills) Ong Ye Kung said yesterday.

The CPE makes regular checks on and on-site inspections at private schools to ensure they comply with regulations. An investigative unit it set up in 2014 also tries to spot potential issues early, he added.

There are about 300 registered private schools now, and about 14,000 Singaporeans enrol in them each year. Mr Ong was answering a question from Dr Lim Wee Kiak (Sembawang GRC) on how CPE polices the private school sector.

Give Sports Hub time, says Grace Fu

The Sports Hub has been operating for less than two years and is "still in its start-up phase", said Culture, Community and Youth Minister Grace Fu.

The Government is giving it time to find its feet and respond to feedback from stakeholders and the public, she added.

Dr Lim Wee Kiak (Sembawang



GRC) had asked why the Sports Hub was not attracting more bookings, and whether its pricing is an issue.

Ms Fu said the operator is still "sorting out the operational problems and understanding the costs of operations". But it has "acknowledged the challenges faced" and has taken into consideration "regular feedback" from her ministry to improve operations.

Most BTO applicants in non-mature estates get flats

From 2013 to last year, about nine in 10 first-timer families – those who

have never owned a subsidised flat – were successful in applying for a Build-to-Order (BTO) flat in a non-mature estate. For second-timers, or those who have owned a subsidised flat before, the success rate was about seven in 10.

Minister for National Development Lawrence Wong said this was due to flat supply having been ramped up from 2011 to 2013, which cleared the demand backlog for first-timers.

He was replying to Mr Alex Yam (Marsiling-Yew Tee GRC), who asked for BTO success rates. But Mr Wong did not reveal the overall success rate, which includes applications for flats in mature estates.

The Sports Hub is still in its start-up phase, said Culture, Community and Youth Minister Grace Fu. ST PHOTO: DESMOND LIM