

Singapore to Charge Rioters After Little India Violence

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Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong ordered an inquiry into Singapore's first riot in more than four decades as tensions rise over the influx of foreign workers in the city state.

"There is no excuse for such violent and criminal behavior," Lee said in a statement yesterday. Twenty-four Indian nationals were charged today in the Singapore Subordinate Courts with one count of rioting.

The riot involving about 400 people broke out on the night of Dec. 8 in the Little India district after a traffic accident, the police said in a separate statement yesterday. Little India, about 3 kilometers (2 miles) from the city state's central business district, attracts thousands of foreign workers on their Sunday days off.

Discontent in Singapore over foreign workers has risen after years of open immigration spurred complaints on social media about congestion and infrastructure strains at a time of widening income inequality. A four-year government campaign to encourage companies to employ fewer overseas workers has in turn led to a labor shortage, prompting some companies to seek cheaper locations.

The riot was "a new thing, that's definitely a watershed of a kind," Bilveer Singh, an associate professor at National University of Singapore's department of political science, said by phone. "I don't think we have seen this for decades now."

Driver Arrested

The violence began after a bus ran over and killed a 33-year-old Indian national, Deputy Commissioner of Police T. Raja Kumar said in a briefing hours after the incident. The bus driver, a 55-year-old Singaporean, was arrested for causing death by negligent act and is assisting with investigations, the police said on Facebook yesterday.

Vehicles damaged during the riot, including 16 police cars, were removed. The situation was brought under control within an hour and officers did not fire any weapons during the incident, authorities said.

About 300 officers responded to the riot with 22 police officers and five auxiliary officers hurt, the police said yesterday. All officers were later released from hospital.

Singapore will boost the police presence in Little India, Tanglin Police Division Commander Lu Yeow Lim said in an interview broadcast on Channel NewsAsia yesterday.

Transport Minister Lui Tuck Yew, a member of parliament for the district, said in a post on his Facebook page that he will look into limiting liquor licenses within the Little India area.

'Criminal Force'

The men who were charged today were accused of “being members of an unlawful assembly whose common object was to overawe, by a show of criminal force,” including throwing pieces of cement at police officers, according to court papers.

The men, aged 22 to 40, didn’t enter pleas and will be held for a week for further investigation. The next hearing is scheduled for Dec. 17. If convicted, they may face a jail term of as long as seven years and be caned.

Amarick Gill, a lawyer acting for the Law Society of Singapore, said in court that the group is working toward getting legal aid for the men.

Right Lessons

The Committee of Inquiry will look into the reasons for the riot and how it was handled, and review how the government manages areas where foreign workers congregate, Lee said yesterday.

“Singapore, its government and its people, should not see this purely as a law and order problem,” Russell Heng, the president of non-governmental organization Transient Workers Count Too, wrote in a commentary published in the Straits Times newspaper today. “It should not be just a case of find the culprit, mete out the sentences and then the punished would not dare do it again. I am hoping, and it is more important, that we learn the right lessons from this episode.”

Large-scale demonstrations have been almost unknown in Singapore since race riots in 1964 killed 36 people and contributed to the island’s ouster from a federation with Malaysia. Singapore and Malaysia were united from 1963 to 1965. Clashes between the Chinese and Malay communities culminated in race riots in 1969 in Malaysia, which spilled briefly into Singapore. After the violence of the 1960s the Singapore government imposed curbs on public assembly.

“In perspective, this is a spontaneous act. It is not something politically motivated,” NUS’s Singh said. The government would need to act sternly against those who rioted, he said. “The future insecurities of Singapore are one, internal, two, important. Singaporeans won’t tolerate this because Singaporeans are becoming very nationalistic.”

Income Inequality

The city’s income inequality as measured by the Gini coefficient widened to 0.488 in 2012 from 0.482 in 2011, the statistics department said in a Feb. 20 report. Hong Kong’s Gini coefficient stood at 0.537 in 2011, the government said last June. The gauge of income inequality ranges from 0, for perfect equality, to 1, which implies one person holds all of a nation’s wealth.

Singapore’s central bank forecasts inflation will probably be 2.5 percent to 3 percent this year and the island is the world’s third-most expensive Asian city to live in, according to an Economist Intelligence Unit ranking.

“We shouldn’t assume that the kind of issues that the local population faces, like the cost of living, would not affect the foreign worker population,” said Leong Chan-Hoong, a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies in Singapore. “Most of them will get a very

decent wage but a very small minority may not, and maybe this is the minority group that happened to be there at the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Worker Influx

The number of people in Singapore has jumped by more than 1.1 million to about 5.3 million since mid-2004 as the government used immigration to make up for a low birth rate. Foreign workers make up about a third of the total workforce.

As part of its effort to reduce imported labor, the government said in February that companies must pay higher levies for lower-skilled foreign employees over the next two years and cut the proportion of overseas workers in some industries. In 2012, the National Wages Council recommended raising the pay of low-wage Singaporean workers as their income growth had lagged the rest of the workforce for the past decade.

In November last year, Singapore authorities charged four Chinese nationals over their involvement in an illegal strike that led to a disruption in some bus services, an unusual public display of labor discord.

The criminal cases are Public Prosecutor v Chinnappa Prabakaran. DAC047291/2013. Singapore Subordinate Courts.

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