

Singapore fertility rate falls to record low

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SINGAPORE: Preliminary estimates show that Singapore's total fertility rate has dropped to a record low of 1.16 last year. This is even lower than the 1.22 in 2009, and well below the replacement rate of 2.1.

Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng said the number of new Permanent Residents in 2010, was halved from a year ago.

Mr Wong, who heads the newly formed National Population and Talent Division, revealed the numbers as he laid out the country's long-term strategy for managing population growth. After an influx of foreigners during the boom years, the government took steps to mitigate their inflow in 2010. Criteria for PR status were tightened, while more was done to integrate new citizens.

The move comes amid growing discomfort among Singaporeans over the increased presence of foreigners in the country.

29,265 foreigners became permanent residents last year, a sharp drop from the 59,460 in 2009, and 79,200 in 2008.

The country's aging population and low fertility rate means that the government will need to tap on immigration to augment the population.

Singapore is still facing the problem of having not enough babies. Mr Wong said the government will continue to support couples' decision to get married and have children. He

added authorities will aim for a pro—family environment but he also acknowledged that boosting fertility will take time.

In a speech on "Inclusive Growth" delivered at the Singapore Perspectives Conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies, Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng reiterated that citizens' interests will always come first.

Growing the population, Mr Wong explained, provides the critical mass to attract investors and grow domestic markets.

The key is in attracting the right kind of people.

"Singapore's population story is still evolving. Looking ahead, continual refinements will need to be made at appropriate junctures to ensure that Singapore will remain our best home. Like other countries around the world, we must continue to welcome suitably qualified people to work and live in Singapore and contribute to our society," said Mr Wong.

Mr Wong described these "suitably qualified people" as an "improvement in the quality of new PRs".

According to the latest population census, PRs in Singapore tend to be better educated. Almost half of the PR population last year were degree holders, compared with 18 per cent of citizens.

The number of new citizens remained relatively steady at 18, 758 in 2010, compared to 19,928 for 2009.

According to Mr Wong, the new Population and Talent Division will formulate, coordinate and review whole of Government policies. In doing so, Mr Wong said the focus is on achieving a "sustainable population profile".

Three principles will guide this effort — to preserve and uphold what is distinctive and unique about Singapore, to ensure growth and change benefit Singaporeans, and to remain nimble and prepared as well as make adjustments along the way.

Mr Wong said what is unique about Singapore is that its people "value hard work, thrift and honesty".

Singapore has also made multi—ethnic diversity work for it.

So in managing the population, Mr Wong said the government will "always be guided by the need to preserve a strong citizen core" and to "maintain stability" in the ethnic mix.

Observers say the latest figures on new immigrants will go some way in addressing Singaporeans' concerns.

Dr Leong Chan Hoong, a Research Fellow with the Institute of Policy Studies, said: "There is a very reassuring effect for Singaporeans and certainly I think this will help assure Singaporeans that the policy makers have their interests as a priority."

Inclusive growth has been a buzzword of late, and more recently, it was debated in Parliament. The idea is that no Singaporean is left out even as the country progresses. Observers said this is likely to be a hot button issue at the next general elections due by February 2012.

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