

Singapore must build up critical mass of labour to compete well

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Singapore needs to build up a critical mass of people in the workforce so that the country can continue to compete for good investments and good jobs.

Minister in Prime Minister's Office and Labour Chief, Lim Swee Say, said this is why Singapore needs to grow its population to 5.5 million.

Mr Lim was one of four ministers who engaged some 900 participants at the plenary session of a conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies on Friday.

Singapore is the only economy in the world with unemployment rate of 1.7 percent yet it is able to grow its economy at 7.9 percent.

And participants at the conference were told that Singapore managed to do this because of a strong workforce.

Mr Lim added: "The point here is this: every economy, if you want to keep growing faster than the rest of the world, have to build a look ahead. Where are the bottlenecks? How we can break the bottleneck and solve that bottleneck before it chokes our growth? Therefore (it) comes back to manpower. I am very sure that for us to continue to compete for good investments, for good jobs, we must have good manpower in sufficient number."

He was replying to a question on why Singapore needs to grow its population to 5.5 million.

Also giving their take on this were three other Cabinet Ministers who explained how this number will affect their respective ministries.

Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan said that in attracting such numbers, demand for healthcare services will also go up.

And he has managed to catch a glimpse of what it would be like to cater to such demand.

Mr Khaw says: "Tan Tock Seng Hospital, there was a day, for don't know what reason, January 14, was 98 percent (full) and it's almost like Hotel 81 occupancy rate. The last decade, the entry of foreign population, expats and so on (have resulted in) very sharp growth, very good for the economy."

And also good for Singapore is attracting new residents to ensure that there's enough young people in the labour force.

George Yeo, Foreign Affairs Minister, said: "Is it possible that we may need that many people if we do not want to age too much or if we need suddenly to tap upon new sources of growth. We check all types of constraints - shorelines for the ports, runways for Changi, water resources, car park space, road space - so our department tests all the limits. If we push that, how far can we go, before we become non-linear and the cost becomes too much to bear? As far as we can, do not put artificial constraints on ourselves so that we will have maximum flexibility to grow, and the opportunities to grow will come to us."

Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, Environment and Water Resources Minister, said with more people in Singapore a balance needs to be found to maintain the environment.

He added: "The environment is an important issue. Clearly providing the necessary resources will become an important issue. But at the same time going forward, I think there will be issues of tradeoffs and compromises because resources are limited. The environment that we have build in the past 14 years painstakingly...has been noticed by international community. (This) is not something that we should give away easily."

It was a lively and candid one and a half hours of discussion with active participation from the audience, who asked questions which range from good governance to what lies ahead for Singapore.

In fact, the session was extended to cater to more questions from the floor.

Questions posed also include the issue of dual citizenship and what the leaders wish to see in 2030. - CNA/ch