

Population crosses 5m mark

Cai Haoxiang

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Singapore's population has crossed the five million mark for the first time but the rate of increase of new foreigners, including permanent residents (PRs), has slowed sharply.

Between June 2009 and June 2010, the pool of PRs expanded by only 7,800.

This increase is just 1.5 per cent compared to 11.5 per cent in the previous 12-month period when there were 55,000 more PRs, according to advance estimates of the 2010 Population Census released by the Statistics Department yesterday.

Similarly, the pool of non-residents - including foreign workers and their families - also grew more slowly during this period: 4.1 per cent versus 4.8 per cent.

But the plunge is even steeper when placed against the 19 per cent jump between June 2007 and June 2008.

Analysts like research fellow Leong Chan Hoong say the foreigner slowdown is a deliberate move by the Government, prompted by the groundswell of anxiety among Singaporeans over competition for jobs, places in schools and universities, as well as rising home prices.

Said Dr Leong, of the Institute of Policy Studies: 'These figures will be reassuring to Singaporeans...But we still need a steady and sustainable growth of immigrants to support the economy.'

As a result of the slowdown in foreigners, Singapore's population rose only marginally to 5,076,700 in June this year.

The increase is just 1.8 per cent compared to 3.1 per cent in June 2009 when the population was 4,987,600.

About two-thirds of the 5.08 million - or 3.23 million - are citizens. The rest are foreigners and among them, 541,000 are PRs and 1.31 million non-residents.

The population, however, is below the 6.5 million figure that the Government said in 2007 it was using for planning purposes.

Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew subsequently said 5.5 million was enough, 'an optimum size for the land that we have, to preserve the open spaces and the sense of comfort'.

The influx of foreigners has become an increasingly contentious topic in recent years and on Sunday, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong devoted a large part of his National Day Rally address to the issue.

Mr Lee urged Singaporeans to be open to foreigners, who are a source of talent, help prop up the ailing birth rate and keep the economy humming to create jobs for Singaporeans.

He also announced measures to further reinforce the Government's policy that citizens come first.

These include a \$9,000 National Service award for soldiers and a tightening of rules to cool the sizzling market for private property and Housing Board flats.

The new moves are on top of several policy changes last year to sharpen the distinction between PRs and citizens, such as giving citizens more benefits and subsidies in health care, housing and education.

These steps have, however, not deterred foreigners.

A Gallup poll released last month shows Singapore as a top destination for migrants, so much so that its population would triple if everyone who wanted to move here was allowed to.

The new census, done every 10 years, was conducted from March to August this year and the full report will be released progressively from 2011.

The figures released yesterday show Singapore is ageing.

The median age of residents, made up of citizens and PRs, went up from 34 years in 2000 to 37.4 years in 2010.

On the other hand, the number of working residents supporting an elderly person has declined.

This old-age support ratio in 2000 was 9.9 residents aged 15 to 64 for each resident aged 65 years and older.

Now, the ratio is 8.2 per elderly person. And if PRs are taken out of the equation, the ratio is 7.2 per elderly person.

Hence, the inflow of PRs has reduced the pace of ageing for the citizen population, noted sociologist and Nominated MP Paulin Straughan.

She added: 'Caring for the elderly will be an increasing strain on the family and the state. With fewer PRs, it becomes even more critical to get more out of Singaporeans in the drive to increase productivity.'