

## **ST-BT Budget Roundtable: Govt working on second stimulus package as Covid-19 situation has worsened, says DPM Heng Swee Keat**

**By Linette Lai**

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SINGAPORE - The Government is working on a second stimulus package as the global coronavirus situation has worsened since the Budget was presented last month, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat said on Wednesday (March 11).

Like the existing \$4 billion package announced in the Budget on Feb 18, the additional stimulus will be aimed at helping workers keep their jobs, Mr Heng said.

It will also help small and medium-sized enterprises make the best of the crisis, and support workers who are retrenched, he added.

"Our topmost concern is workers, because if our workers can keep their jobs, consumption can resume and life can take place as normally as possible," he said.

Mr Heng, who is also Finance Minister, was speaking at a Budget 2020 Roundtable jointly organised by The Straits Times and The Business Times, with OCBC Bank as the presenting sponsor.

Also on the panel were OCBC head of global commercial banking Linus Goh, Ademco Security Group managing director Toby Koh and Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Faizal Yahya. The moderator was ST associate editor Vikram Khanna.

Mr Heng noted that uncertainty has grown in global financial markets in recent weeks, as the virus has spread to major economies such as the United States and European Union.

"Our first priority is the outbreak but, at the same time, we must look at how we can revive the economy," he said, adding that he has been working with the various ministries on what else needs to be done.

"We have to continue to be very vigilant, to look at this wave and how we need to stay on top of this development."

In particular, the Government is looking at ways to support self-employed people who have been hard hit by the crisis, Mr Heng said.

"We need to look at this whole model to see how we can strengthen it better, so that when you have a downturn like this, they can be better protected," he added.

When asked if Singapore will consider tapping its past reserves, Mr Heng said that he is not ruling out the option.

"Our reserves have been set aside to meet the needs of a rainy day, and it looks like this rain is not a light one," he said. "So we will have to look at what we need to do."

But he noted that President Halimah Yacob will need to assent to this. "We will have to discuss this very carefully, as we did during the global financial crisis," Mr Heng said.

At the same time, Singapore should aim to emerge stronger from the outbreak, he added. He noted that the outbreak has revealed certain needs of the global economy.

"If we can be first off the block to innovate... we can respond to this new situation very dynamically and come up with innovations that will meet the needs of Singapore and (the) world," Mr Heng said.