SINGAPORE: Former Singapore Cabinet Minister Lim Kim San has died at the age of 89. He was best known as "Mr HDB" for his role in providing low-cost housing for thousands of Singaporeans in the 1960s.

In his retirement, Mr Lim continued with other high-profile appointments, as well as a quiet one - as a talent scout for the People’s Action Party in its self-renewal drive.

When contacted by Channel NewsAsia, family members said Mr Lim died peacefully at about 5.30pm on Thursday at his Dalvey Road residence.

They said he had been ill for sometime.

For someone who grew up helping out with the family business, politics was not Mr Lim’s first career choice.

Born in 1916 in Singapore, Mr Lim was the eldest of six children.

He was educated at Anglo-Chinese School and then Raffles College, where he studied economics.

When World War II arrived and the Japanese occupied Singapore, Mr Lim was one of many tortured on suspicion of being pro-communist and pro-British.

"Those of us who have survived the horror and the brutality of the Japanese Occupation will never forget them. It was a traumatic and humiliating experience but it politicised my generation and we vowed never to let our fate be decided by others," Mr Lim said in November 1996.

After the war, Mr Lim was, in his own words, a young man "in a hurry to make a living" to make up for the wasted years.

He made his first million when he came up with a machine to produce sago pearls cheaply.

He then went on to become a director of several banks.

When invited to join the People’s Action Party to contest the 1959 elections, the businessman said no.

But he agreed to be appointed to the Public Service Commission, and a year later, he was made Chairman of the new Housing Board, where he worked for free, preferring to be a volunteer.

He defied all the detractors, particularly the expatriates in the Singapore Improvement Trust, who said he could not build 10,000 units a year.

Mr Lim said in 1996, "The expatriates who left the then SIT (Singapore Improvement Trust), the predecessor of the Housing Board, doubted if we could ever do it, and so did the government. So a committee was set up under Professor Lim Tay Boh to find out whether we had the capability and the materials to complete 10,000 houses as planned. Well, when Lim Tay Boh's committee published its report, the Housing Board had already completed 10,000 units of housing and among the doubts expressed in the report, was this and I quote, "The team showed more enthusiasm than skill."

Some said that in solving Singapore's housing problem, Mr Lim saved the PAP.

He himself was more modest, saying the success of the housing programme was also due to government funding, as housing was, and is, a top priority.
Still, it was he who had broken the hold of the contractors' cartels, and insisted on standardization which made building much easier.

Mr Lim had said, "I was determined to break the cartel. Then I opened it to any contractor who feels that he can undertake the contract for the Housing Board, as long as there is a bank guarantee. And the old contractors who formed the cartel knew they cannot make money that easily."

He added, "We want them to adhere to specific specifications and once there is free competition, you're not going to make that much money. So gradually they fell off."

For providing a fifth of Singapore's population with decent, affordable housing, he was the first Singaporean to receive the Order of Temasek in 1962, the country's highest honour.

Another award was the Ramon Magsaysay Award, in recognition of his community leadership, which provided a model for the developing world.

Finally in 1963, he was persuaded to stand for elections in Cairnhill and was appointed National Development Minister after he won.

Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew said in November 1996, "He's a practical man and produced results. He had told me when I first told him to go into politics, that he could not make speeches, and that he was unsuited for politics. I told him to speak his mind and not worry whether his speeches sound like Rajaratnam's. He was not a spellbinding orator but he carried his ground."

Mr Lim had said, "My late wife used to tell her friends that the best thing that ever happened to me was when I joined the PAP. She knew the PAP required its members to have a certain standard of ethics and moral character, so she knew that I had to discipline myself body and soul, and that I had to cut down on entertaining and partying with my business associates and I cannot get into mischief."

When the merger with Malaya took place in 1963, the businessman in Lim Kim San welcomed it, for it meant a bigger common market.

And he got along well with the Malay Ministers, including Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman.

But when tensions rose between the leaders on both sides of the Causeway over the direction Malaysia should take and race riots broke out, the ever-practical Lim Kim San was for Singapore becoming independent.

"We merged thinking that we would get a Malaysian Malaysia. But the Malays have a different view. They have this 'bumiputra' policy, it means that you are not the same class citizen as they are. So from the very start, it is a different policy," Mr Lim said in December 1996.

In June 1965, when he accompanied the Tunku to the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference in London, he was the first Singapore Minister to learn from the Tunku that he had decided Singapore had to be out of Malaysia.

"My feeling was, to tell you frankly, one of relief that we no longer have to refer to someone else where we are going, that we can decide our own fate. That's one of relief. Then came the more thoughtful one, how do we live on our own," Mr Lim said.

With Goh Keng Swee taking over the new Interior and Defence Ministry to defend Singapore, Mr Lim was appointed Finance Minister.
During his long and distinguished public career, Mr Lim also held the Defence and Environment portfolios.

As Education Minister, Mr Lim was mindful of the need for the Singapore worker to be equipped with the right skills.

Effective bilingualism was one such skill, said Mr Lim, who learned Mandarin only after becoming a Minister.

"In this way, students who need to switch from one language stream to another will not have difficulties," he said in Mandarin.

"The leaders of the future, no matter what sector, be it banking, commerce, industry, education, or politics - he must be at least bilingual," he added.

Mr Lim gave up politics in 1980, but he remained active in public life.

Mr Lim was Chairman of the Port of Singapore Authority for 15 years till 1994; under his stewardship, Singapore became the world's number one container port.

He also served as Deputy Managing Director of the Monetary Authority of Singapore from 1981 to 1982.

As Executive Chairman of Singapore Press Holdings, he transformed the outfit into a corporate giant, staying on as Senior Advisor till 2005.

He was also Chairman of the Council of Presidential Advisors, and was the first Chancellor of the Singapore Management University.

So adept was he at judging the ability of a person that he was also the PAP's "talent scout".

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said in February 1990, "As Chairman of what has come to be known as the Lim Kim San Committee, he has over the years interviewed hundreds of candidates to shortlist a few dozens from among whom a few were eventually chosen.

"He has probed potential candidates for their motivation, the attitude, integrity and human relations skills. He has done so skillfully, and tactfully, relying on his enormous experience and uncanny insight to identify those who are truly committed, suitable and show the most promise."

Perhaps another side which few got to see was the Lim Kim San who enjoyed life and lived it to the fullest.

Minister Mentor Lee said, "He enjoys life -- a gourmet, a fastidious eater. If I had to choose a food taster, Lim Kim San would be my choice. When I see him eat with relish, I know that it's a good dish. In short he made his life worth living by his indomitable spirit."

Mr Lim's family are in the process of making the wake and funeral arrangements.

Mr Lim's wake is likely to be held at the family's Dalvey Road home.

Mr Lim left behind five surviving children, 12 grandchildren and 5 great-grandchildren. - CNA/ct