Team to examine legal services sector

High-powered bid to help S'pore grow as global law hub

BY K.C. VIJAYAN & BEN NADARAJAN

A HIGH Court judge will head a high-powered team to review the entire legal services sector here and recommend measures to help Singapore retain its edge in providing legal services to the world.

Justice V.K. Rajah’s committee has nine members, including Judicial Commissioner Sundararaj Maneon and Solicitor-General Chan Seng Onn.

It will examine areas like legal education, the role of supporting organisations like the Law Society and future directions for the legal profession as a whole to help Singapore grow as an international legal hub.

Deputy Prime Minister and Law Minister S. Jayakumar said yesterday that Singapore has to ensure that the legal services sector continues to support Singapore’s plans for future economic growth.

"In this changing landscape, Singapore is growing in importance as a legal services hub for the region and beyond," he added.

He pointed out that while Singapore’s overall services export has doubled in the past 10 years, legal services export had surged six times in the period.

He cited international arbitration as a potential boom area in which Singapore could leverage on its many advantages, like the English language.

It was the top Asian city selected for arbitrations conducted by the International Chamber of Commerce’s International Court of Arbitration, one of the largest of such institutions in the world.

"Worldwide, we are No. 6 after Geneva, Paris, London, Zurich and New York. Growth in international arbitration work will strengthen the legal services sector as a whole, which will help attract other kinds of international commercial legal work to Singapore," he added.

Members of the legal fraternity contacted by The Straits Times lauded the move as timely.

Said retired High Court judge G.P. Selvam: "We need to develop more arbitration experts here who can deliver services efficiently and expeditiously."

He cited an ongoing case that involved a London party which decided to pull out the case from the Singapore High Court last year in favour of arbitration here.

National University of Singapore law faculty dean Tan Heng Han said one of the areas the committee could look at is how the NUS and the future Singapore Management University law schools can complement each other.

Said Professor Tan: "Globalisation will lead to NUS having to compete with the best law schools in the world."

He said the school had reached an agreement with several top American law schools about double degrees in law. It will allow a student to study for three years in NUS, then for two years in a United States university, and graduate with a double law degree.

"It would mean the graduates would be versatile and could, for example, handle matters which involve Singapore and US companies," he said.

Law Society president Philip Jeyaretnam welcomed the new committee and noted that two of its members are drawn from the council of the society.

"We expect to offer considerable input to the work of this committee. "Singapore plays a key role in financial and arbitration centres in Asia and the legal profession is integral to this."

"An integrated approach to strengthening the legal services sector in Singapore is timely."

The committee is expected to complete its work early next year.

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Local firms can hire foreign talent to practise law here

LAW firms here will be allowed to hire high-quality foreign lawyers to practise Singapore law in areas like banking and finance and do other corporate regional work.

These lawyers must come from reputable law schools in their home country and have work experience in cutting-edge financial products or financial services.

Under the scheme, they would have to spend at least a year doing offshore work and pass a qualifying test.

Deputy Prime Minister and Law Minister S. Jayakumar said the scheme will enable local law firms to attract high-quality talent to grow their regional practices and compete globally.

Currently, there are some 542 foreign lawyers registered with the Attorney-General’s Chambers who do offshore work in joint-venture and foreign law practices.

But the new scheme is understood to be aimed at attracting other foreign lawyers to work in local firms — and not be confined to backroom, research or offshore work.

It is for lawyers like Ms Nisha Kaur Uberoi and others from countries like India and China.

The 27-year-old qualified from the National Law School in Bangalore, reputed to be India’s top law school, in 2002.

She then topped her master’s degree course at the National University of Singapore in 2004 and has been employed at leading law firm Rajah & Tann for 14 months.

She said: "This is a very good scheme. It shows Singapore is very open to talent, is aware of the growing global market and is prepared to treat foreign lawyers on equal terms."

Harry Elias law firm partner Latiff Ibrahim described the move as an "excellent idea" to attract foreign talent for local firms. "I do not see them as a threat. The challenge really is how do we attract such high-quality lawyers and whether we can afford to pay for them," he said.

But the Law Society expressed reservations and concern about how the scheme will work in practice. Limited licences for these foreigners issued by the AG will set them apart from lawyers admitted to the Bar the traditional way through application to the society.

Law Society president Philip Jeyaretnam said: "If outstanding foreign lawyers are to practise Singapore law, they should do so following admission under Section 7 of the Legal Profession Act and under the same disciplinary regime as Singaporean practitioners."

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