Pay Lawyers more to keep them: Chief Justice

By Pearl Forss, Channel NewsAsia

SINGAPORE: More young lawyers are switching careers, citing long hours, unrewarding pay and stress as reasons.

This causes a shortage of lawyers, and as the economy booms and the demand for law services goes up, the problem is becoming more acute.

How to address this problem?

"Pay them well," said Chief Justice Chan Sek Keong, in his address to law students at the inaugural Singapore Legal Forum on Saturday.

"Our young lawyers enjoy a degree of professional and social freedom and mobility which lawyers of my generation have never experienced. Perhaps the solution is in the old fashion but still fashionable way of using carrots without the stick since the latter doesn't work. Pay them well. Greed works most of the time, even for the large majority of people in affluent societies," he said.

In recent years, even the best-paying firms in Singapore are seeing their young lawyers jumping ship to Hong Kong, where salaries for junior lawyers start at about S$11,650 a month.

In contrast, the big firms in Singapore pay junior lawyers just over $4,000.

A second law school has been established at the Singapore Management University.

Also, the NUS Law Faculty has increased its intake and firms are now allowed to hire foreign lawyers.

But the shortage has not eased yet.

Another issue of concern addressed at the Legal Forum is how to make the law more accessible to the public.

Laws may be available online but the language in which it is written makes it difficult for the layman to understand it.
So the Chief Justice said that he would ask the Law Academy's publishing committee to study the feasibility of publishing simplified law books.

While access to the law is important, access to justice is even more so.

This need will be provided by lawyers who do pro bono work, that is providing service free of charge.

But such services are currently confined to Community Court cases, and this year, more convicted offenders are appearing in High Court appeals without lawyers.

In his speech, the Chief Justice also addressed the issue of restoring confidence in the law profession, particularly after the high-profile case of lawyer David Rasif who fled with more than $12 million in clients' monies.

"We must be more discerning about what we read in the media. The facts do not suggest any loss of confidence in the legal profession," said the Chief Justice.

"On the contrary, our large and medium law firms are generally held in high regard in Singapore and in the region. All the ethical and professional lapses that I have come across in my 40 years in the law have emanated from small law firms. It's very unfortunate," he added.

Although only a small minority of lawyers in these firms have committed breach of trust, the Chief Justice stressed that all law students must be taught the importance of ethical values.

The forum was organised by the UK Singapore Law Students Society. - CNA/ir