Prime Minister Lee talks about allowing influx of foreigners, while acknowledging Singaporeans’ concerns

SINGAPORE — The questions on the issue of foreigners came thick and fast last night: Why couldn’t the Government control the number of foreigners earlier? Would the influx of foreigners affect Singaporeans’ employment prospects as well as nation building?

In response, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said the Government has been controlling the numbers. “But in the last few years, the opportunity was good, the growth was strong, the wind was blowing and we thought we should catch the wind,” said Mr Lee.

With growth and opportunities to be seized, the Government “did the right thing” in allowing more foreigners into Singapore before the economic crisis, Mr Lee reiterated as he acknowledged Singaporeans’ concerns about the influx of foreigners.

If it had not done so, projects such as the integrated resorts could have been delayed by the crisis — stalling the benefits that could be reaped, he said. “And then today, we would have been left with nothing. But as a result of catching the wind, I think we are in a strong position today,” he said.

With a controlled inflow of foreigners in future, there will be sufficient jobs here for both Singaporeans and their foreign counterparts, he said.

Mr Lee added that the Government is watching “carefully” the impact of foreigners on nation building. “It’s a valid concern which we are looking into,” said Mr Lee, who cited the People’s Association’s “many programmes where we bring together” the new citizens and other Singaporeans.

Ngee Ann Polytechnic student Matthew Zachary Liu noted that the influx of foreigners leaves younger Singaporeans feeling “left behind” amid the intense competition.

Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan also noted that the term “foreign talent” could feed the perception that Singaporeans could not measure up while Dr Aditya Gupta, who recently became a citizen, urged Singaporeans not to “marginalise foreign talent”.

Said Mr Lee: “We are equipping you to run a good race ... I think in Singapore, we make sure you have the best chance possible, because the competition isn’t the foreigner who might be here, it’s the millions of foreigners in the other places and they’re competing with us whether we like it or not.”