

## **NEW AGENCY TO BUILD TIES WITH OVERSEAS SINGAPOREANS**

*Unit will organise more events to get them together and keep in closer touch with home*

**Leslie Koh, The Straits Times, 14 Mar 2006**

Singaporeans who live abroad will receive more news and information about events back home, through a new agency set up to build closer ties with them.

Launched yesterday, the Overseas Singaporean Unit will organise more activities around the world to get Singaporeans together, keep them in close touch with what is happening back home, and help them when they return.

It plans, among other things, to hold more networking events to bring Singaporeans and potential employers together, conduct feedback sessions and organise cultural activities.

Set up by the Government, its activities will expand on similar efforts made by such agencies as Contact Singapore, run by the Manpower Ministry, and non-profit organisation Singapore International Foundation.

It will coordinate some of the programmes and activities of these organisations as well as start new ones.

Set up in January to report directly to the Prime Minister's Office, the agency was launched in London last night by Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng.

He said it was part of a larger effort to address overseas Singaporeans' desire to stay connected to home.

'The Government recognises the Singapore diaspora as an integral part of our society,' he told The Straits Times before he left for London.

Mr Wong is in the British capital on a working visit, at the invitation of British Home Secretary Charles Clarke, whom he is meeting to discuss such issues as emergency preparedness and terrorism.

There are an estimated 100,000 Singaporeans working or studying overseas. Most are in Europe, America and Australia. They can turn to the agency for such information as news of Singapore, jobs or schools for their children when they return to Singapore. One-stop information centres - both online and physical ones abroad - are being planned to help and advise them.

Political observers view it as yet another move to improve links with the large number of Singaporeans based overseas who will for the first time be allowed to vote in the coming general election.

While fewer than 1,000 have registered themselves on the overseas electoral roll, Mr Wong dismissed suggestions that Singaporeans were not interested in politics back home.

Voting was 'not the only way' to play a role in shaping Singapore's future, he said, and added: 'Countries like the US are many years ahead of us in terms of extending overseas voting to their citizens. We are only beginning and I think we should not be too discouraged.'

Overseas Singaporeans interviewed welcomed the new agency, especially as a source of information.

Beijing-based businessman Joseph Chua, 47, said one common problem Singaporeans faced was fitting their children back into Singapore's education system after attending foreign schools.

London-based Sylvia Lim, global business development director of shirt-making company CYC The Custom Shop, said that although some of the services were available in Britain, they were provided by informal voluntary groups.

'So, the frequency or type of activities depend on who is running the group at that moment. It will be useful to have a formal organisation, as it will be more professional and have more stability.'