

# S'pore takes pragmatic approach to human rights: Chan Heng Chee

Social and racial harmony, gender equality key themes of routine UN review

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Singapore takes a pragmatic approach to human rights, and by doing so it aims to achieve two things: tangible outcomes while adhering to the rule of law; and a balance between the interests of the individual and the broader needs of society.

In this process, it has had to make difficult policy decisions as a small, multiracial and multi-religious society, Ambassador-at-Large Chan Heng Chee said yesterday, during a routine review of Singapore's human rights record by the United Nations.

"We strive to achieve better outcomes for our people in a manner that reflects our national context and realities. Forging a common national identity while maintaining racial and social harmony is therefore of paramount importance."

Prof Chan added that Singapore took swift measures to cushion its population from the impact of the pandemic, especially the low-income and vulnerable.

"Given the long-term, structural challenges, we are taking measures to emerge stronger and better in the post-Covid-19 world – by strengthening our social compact, and building a more resilient and sustainable home for our people."

The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) looks at the human rights records of all 193 UN member states every five years. Singapore's 20-page report submitted to the UN in January covered a range of topics including the country's efforts to advance migrant worker well-being, and protect women from discrimination.

The report is discussed in per-



Ambassador-at-Large Chan Heng Chee, who joined the Universal Periodic Review virtually from Singapore yesterday, said: "We will continue to work hard to preserve social mobility, so that every Singaporean has a good education and a fair shot at success, regardless of their background." PHOTO: MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

son at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. During the process, other member states can pose questions or make recommendations to the country under review.

Singapore's participation this year was in hybrid format, with the Permanent Representative of Singapore to the United Nations Office in Geneva, Ambassador Umej Bhatia, and his team attending there, and Prof Chan joining virtually from Singapore.

Over a three-hour session, Prof Chan outlined Singapore's approach to promoting and protecting human rights.

She noted that Singapore ratified the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in 2017.

On social policies, she said the Government has increased grants

to help more Singaporeans acquire their own homes, paying special attention to low-income families. It has also invested significantly in early childhood education.

"We will continue to work hard to preserve social mobility, so that every Singaporean has a good education and a fair shot at success, regardless of their background. This is fundamental to our meritocratic society," she said.

She stressed the importance of lifelong learning and the need to prepare Singaporeans to cope with structural economic shifts through the SkillsFuture programme. More social services and protections have been introduced to support the vulnerable, she said, citing cash supplements to lower-wage workers and the elderly, and the SG Digital Office to drive digital adoption.

On Singapore's efforts to eliminate discrimination against women and enhance gender equality, she cited a series of national conversations on women's development, launched last September. These conversations will result in a White Paper to be submitted to Parliament later this year.

Following the UPR, an outcome report will be prepared and Singapore may choose to accept the recommendations made. After its first review in 2011, Singapore supported, in whole or in part, 84 of the 112 recommendations made. And it did so for 125 out of 236 recommendations after the second review in 2016.

In his remarks yesterday, Mr Bhatia said that policymaking does not exist in a vacuum: "It requires maintaining a dynamic and

delicate balance between different segments of our society, while managing demands to privilege one group over others."

In a statement yesterday, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said Singapore remains committed to the UPR process, which is an opportunity to take stock of its progress and engage with other states on issues "regardless of any differences in approaches as there is no one-size-fits-all approach to the realisation of human rights".

"We will examine the recommendations received, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, and consider how they can be implemented and best contribute to the promotion and protection of human rights in Singapore."

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