

Record number of foreigners becoming Singapore citizens

The number of foreigners becoming Singapore citizens or permanent residents will possibly hit a new record this year, a welcome boost as the city-state faces a dwindling population.

Faced with sharply falling birth rates and a rapidly ageing population, the city-state has been trying to attract foreigners.

About 7,300 Singapore citizenships were granted in the first half of 2007, Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng told The Straits Times. If the trend continues, the city-state will have 14,600 new citizens this year, 10 percent more than the 13,200 naturalised last year.

The new immigrants come predominantly from Southeast Asia, South and East Asia, tending to share similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds with Singaporeans. The population of Singapore is 4.68 million.

'While there is no need to pretend that there are no differences between new immigrants and native Singaporeans, we should recognise that and accept that integration takes time and effort,' Wong was quoted as saying.

There have been complaints about competition for jobs.

'Our challenge is not the number of jobs available,' Wong said. 'It is that we do not have enough people to match the current rate of job creation.' He cited outreach efforts by schools and expatriate bodies.

'Integration is a dynamic process that requires sustained efforts across all segments of society,' Wong said.

The predominantly Chinese population currently includes 14 percent Malays, 6 percent Indians and various other groups.

The country needs 50,000 newborns a year to maintain the population from within, but annual births have plunged below 40,000 for years, despite government incentives meant to encourage childbearing.

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