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Intelligent Island

Digital opportunities for all Singaporeans.

PM Visits Vietnam

SINGAPORE'S Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong visited Vietnam in September for the 10th anniversary of the Vietnam-Singapore Industrial Park in Binh Duong province. The trip was at the invitation of Vietnamese PM Nguyen Tan Dung.

During his visit, PM Lee signed a commemorative plaque and witnessed the signing of a commitment letter to launch the second phase of the industrial park.

Since the signing of the Framework Agreement on Vietnam-Singapore Connectivity last December, the friendly relations between the two countries have been demonstrated in many fields, especially in economics and trade.

During his meeting with PM Dung, PM Lee noted that while there were already some joint projects in port and power generation, there

was potential for Singapore companies to be involved in more infrastructure development projects, which were now a priority area for Vietnam as its economy expands.

He said: "What's important is not just one or two projects but a continuing momentum of activities to carry our relationship forward as your economy grows and as it integrates into the Southeast Asian and Asian economies."

PM Dung expressed Vietnam's hopes to strengthen cooperation with Singapore by supporting Singaporean enterprises to invest in such fields as energy, insurance and telecommunications in the country.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong met Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung at the Reunification Palace in Ho Chi Minh City.

Foreign Minister Visits Cuba and Panama

L-R: Director of PSA Ng Chee Keong, Panama Ambassador to Singapore H.E. Eduardo Real and Minister for Foreign Affairs George Yeo at Miraflores Locks, Panama Canal.

IT was a packed September schedule for Singapore's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr George Yeo, in two interesting locations in far-flung Central America.

First, in Havana, Cuba, he called on a few Ministers including Minister of Economy and Planning Jose Luis Rodriguez and Minister of Foreign Trade Raul de la Nuez, as well as members of the Cuban business community. They had a good exchange of views on economic development. Mr Yeo discussed with Minister of Public Health Jose Ramon Balaguer on possible healthcare cooperation. Mr Yeo also had bilateral meetings with his counterparts at the 14th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

After Cuba, Mr Yeo made an official visit to

DPM's Wife Visits Laos

SINGAPORE has been extending more assistance to Laos in the field of rehabilitation.

On August 31, students of the National Rehabilitation Centre (NRC) in Vientiane, Laos, received a special visitor – Mrs Lalitha Jayakumar, wife of Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister, Prof S Jayakumar.

A medical doctor herself, Mrs Jayakumar was shown around the centre to understand its operations. She was on an official visit at the invitation of the Lao Standing DPM, Mr Somsavat Lengsavad.

The NRC, established under the Lao Ministry of Public Health in 1964, was originally set up to produce prosthetic limbs for war veterans and victims. Currently, it houses a Special School for the blind and deaf, a cerebral and spinal neuron unit, a prosthetic and orthotic workshop and a wheelchair workshop.

Under the Singapore International Foundation's Singapore Volunteers Overseas Programme, a Specialist (Rehabilitation) Team has been working with the NRC since October 2004 to upgrade the skills of its health professionals in the treatment of patients with neurological and spinal injuries.

Accompanied by Mrs Bounkonmany Lengsavad, Mrs Jayakumar was hosted to a warm reception by the NRC Director, Dr Thongchanh Thepsomphou, with his staff and 70 students.

At the prosthetic and orthotic workshop, they were briefed on the process of fabricating devices such as arm, leg and knee attachments, as well as corsets and orthopaedic shoes.

The visitors also witnessed how deaf and blind students at the Special School follow the general education curriculum using sign language and Braille respectively.

The centre's visually impaired students, showed how active they could be, putting on a performance of Lao and English songs, including current English hits such as 'Take Me To Your Heart', which were received enthusiastically by the audience.

Concluding her visit, Mrs Jayakumar presented some sports equipment and stationery to the students – tokens of appreciation for her visit and of Singapore's continued support.

Mrs Jayakumar presenting sports equipment and stationery for the students to Dr Thongchanh Thepsomphou, Director of the National Rehabilitation Centre.

Goodwill Tourists

TO many people, spending your days labouring at some remote village may seem far from the ideal vacation.

Yet, there is a rising trend that sees more Singaporeans taking time off from work to volunteer overseas. Some even quit well-paying, cushy jobs to do so.

The Singapore International Foundation (SIF) has reported a ten-fold rise in numbers of people joining its Singapore Volunteers Overseas Programme since the tsunami disaster that hit Asia in December 2004.

The SIF was established in 1991 to enhance Singapore's globalisation efforts. It is a not-for-profit organisation that plays a unique role in actively engaging Singaporeans in international volunteerism. SIF forges people-to-people links, and helps to shape national identity and a sense of what it means to be Singaporean in a borderless world.

In the past, the foundation dispatched about 700 professionals abroad over a period of 13 years. In the last financial year alone, more than 360 professionals went on volunteer assignments overseas. Another 420 will go by the end of this financial year.

Unlike youth expeditions which are school projects, these stints take a longer period and are meant solely for professionals who would like to use up their vacation time or who had quit their jobs.

Traditionally, these stints have been harder to commit to, but since late 2004 when the SIF started to arrange short-haul trips (up to three weeks) that could be completed during vacations, more Singaporean professionals have ventured out of their comfort zones to volunteer overseas.

These "goodwill tourists" pay anything between $1,500 and $2,000 for airfares, lodging and meals, just like they would for a "normal" holiday, usually in the remote areas of China, Nepal, Cambodia, Sri Lanka and India. Once at their destinations, volunteers travel mostly on foot, have simple meals and stay at modest lodgings sometimes without basic sanitary facilities.

Instead of sightseeing, shopping and eating, they volunteer technical knowledge, soft skills and labour to contribute to making life better, in areas as diverse as early childhood and maternal education, information technology and language training, nutrition, public hygiene, community healthcare and rehabilitation of disadvantaged children and the disabled.

Typically, these volunteers are professionals holding white-collar jobs, ranging from teachers to businessmen in their late 20s to 50s.

"It's not a sacrifice. It's ten times more fulfilling than my holiday in Tuscany last year," said Ms Shirley Lim, a general manager for a trade exhibition company who spent 15 of the 24 days of her annual leave last year teaching in a school in Nepal.

Civil servant Khwaja Ismail Sudderuddin, 64, has been on week-long projects to Afghanistan twice in the past 18 months. He was part of a United Nations effort to teach project management to Afghan civil servants. "There has been virtually no development in the country for the past 25 years, which is why the officials are now eager to learn and catch up," he said.

Panama and met the President of the Chamber of Commerce, Industries and Agriculture Diego Eleta. They discussed further bilateral economic cooperation within the framework of the Panama-Singapore Free Trade Agreement, as well as areas for Singapore to share its experience, such as education and research & development in biotechnology. Mr Yeo also had good discussions with Ministers including First Vice President and Foreign Minister Samuel Lewis Navarro at a dinner hosted by the ethnic Chinese community in Panama.

Separately, Mr Yeo had met Panamanian President Martin Torrijos at the 14th NAM Summit. He welcomed the proposed visit to Singapore by President Torrijos next year.

Mercy Relief (an independent charitable non-governmental humanitarian organisation) volunteers sorting out the books to be sent to Lebanon.

How to Trade Well

SINCE ancient times, the island of Singapore has relied on performing well as a trading centre to make a living. The manner in which people and goods can move in and out of the country has always been the key to its success in international trade and economic development.

Today, managing trade includes the important administrative activity called customs. And Singapore has been sharing its expertise in this field in training programmes such as the six-day Customs Management Techniques course conducted by Singapore Customs as part of the Singapore Cooperation Programme (SCP).

The course aims to provide participants with a better understanding of how the Singapore Customs is managed, the various programmes and facilities it has for customs management, and its role in revenue protection and trade regulation.

The 21 course participants are customs officials from around the world, from countries such as Brazil, China, Kenya, Swaziland and Vanuatu. They were all in middle to senior management positions, who had been nominated by their respective governments.

The course comprised classroom lectures as well as site visits to licensed premises and outstations to observe the operational aspects of customs control, cargo clearance and passenger clearance.

Some of the topics covered were: the organisation and functions of Singapore Customs; the use of the computer application systems to enhance efficiency and effectiveness; documentary control on imports, exports and transshipments through Singapore; customs control of licensed premises; certification of origin of goods; and the strategic goods control system.

For participants like Mr Peter Terence Leonard of St. Lucia (see article below), the sharing of work experiences among course participants from diverse cultures and backgrounds was also a highlight.

Participants also took time off for some sightseeing around Singapore, visiting tourist attractions such as Sentosa, Clarke Quay and Chinatown.

Singapore has provided technical assistance to developing countries since the 1960s. As a country whose only resource is its people, Singapore believes that human resource development is vital for economic and social progress.

The Singapore Cooperation Programme (SCP) was established in 1992, bringing together under one framework various technical assistance programmes offered by Singapore. Since then, Singapore has sponsored training courses and study visits for well over 40,000 officials from 161 countries.

Participants of the Customs Management Techniques course conducted under the Singapore Cooperation Programme.

Mr Peter Terence Leonard, Comptroller of the Customs and Excise Department of St Lucia in the Carribean.

Struck by Singapore

FOR a man who had written his master's degree thesis on Singapore's economic development, seeing this city-state for the first time after 23 years was quite an experience.

Mr Peter Terence Leonard, Comptroller of the Customs and Excise Department of St. Lucia in the Caribbean, was in Singapore in November as a participant of the Singapore Cooperative Programme (SCP). A six-day course on Customs Management Techniques conducted by Singapore Customs gave him the chance to see for himself a place he had first studied so many years ago.

Describing the city as having "performed a miracle" with its growth from a place with so few natural resources to an economic stronghold within a short time, Terence was impressed with Singapore's sound economic policies and the discipline with which the people saw them through.

"Singapore is all that I imagined, and more", he beamed. He noticed that there was no compromise in maintaining a balance between urban infrastructure and the natural ecosystem – both exist in harmony here, which he felt is important for a service-oriented city.

Terence's key takeaway from the course was the "single window" concept of Singapore's TradeNet, which is the world's first nationwide electronic trade documentation system that approves permit applications almost instantaneously. "This is the first thing that I would like to put in place back home in St. Lucia," he declared.

He also hopes to adapt for St. Lucia Singapore's trade facilitation methods for both passengers and cargo, and the approach of forging close partnerships with trade-related agencies.

In order for these systems to be up and running, he cited the high level of cooperation exhibited among government agencies and Singaporeans to be an essential component. "There is a collective responsibility I see here, whereby everyone works towards the benefit of the country," he said. He believes having a common goal spurred Singapore towards achieving economic progress rapidly.

Over the weekend, Terence had the opportunity to visit Sentosa, a recreational island at the southern tip of Singapore. He fell in love with one of the attractions known as the Musical Fountain, which he described as "captivating, electrifying and extremely artistic".

Mesmerised by the choreography of colourful laser displays beamed against a backdrop of water, accompanied by synchronised music, he said: "The cultural orientation I saw in the laser show truly reflects the multiplicity of races in Singapore and the harmony in which people live, work and play here."

Wakeboard World Cup Makes a Splash

Singapore's water sports scene made new waves recently with the HSBC Wakeboard World Cup held at Bedok Reservoir in the northwestern part of the country.

The Wakeboard World Cup is a series of world-class invitational wakeboarding and waterskiing events in major cities around the world. Held on September 30 and October 1, the Singapore event saw 35 of the world's top wakeboarding athletes (24 men and 11 women) from 15 countries compete at WaterFest Singapore 2006 before 16,500 spectators – making it one of the biggest international water sports festivals in Asia.

Wakeboarding, a freestyle sport that developed from surfing and waterskiing, is also influenced by skateboarding and snowboarding. It is the fastest-growing water sport in the world, with competitors performing flips, tricks, spins and a variety of other gravity-defying aerial stunts, sometimes as high as 20 feet in the air.

Mr Derek Leong, Vice President of the Singapore Waterski and Wakeboard Federation, said: "This is the first world-class wakeboarding event to be held in Singapore. It has always been a dream of the federation to bring the sport to highly populated residential areas, and people can now look forward to a world-class event literally at their doorstep."

According to a Singapore Sports Council survey, an estimated 50,000 Singaporeans have tried the sport at least once and it is especially popular among adults 25 to 35 years old.

It has been bonanza time for water sports enthusiasts in Singapore since the island's many catchment areas have opened up since 2004 for activities on the water. It's all part of Singapore's effort to enhance the quality of life in the Republic, in all its dimensions.

Apart from wakeboarding at Bedok Reservoir, there is sailing at Lower Seletar Reservoir and canoeing at MacRitchie Reservoir. At MacRitchie, nature lovers can also take a slow boat ride through the many small streams there to enjoy nature.

During the women's finals in Singapore, Dallas Friday, a United States Masters and multiple X-Games champion, fell and injured herself during her performance, but nonetheless was initially crowned winner in the Pro Women's category.

But the result was later overturned after fellow American and defending champion Emily Copeland filed an official protest to the International Water-Ski Federation. The judges reviewed the scoresheets and decided to give Copeland more credit for the tricks she did, and award her the US$10,000 prize and name her the women's overall series winner.

In the men's division, American Phillip Soven beat compatriot Danny Harf in the final to win US$15,000. Multiple X-Games champion Harf took the overall series title.

Above: Multiple X-Games champion Dallas Friday practising for the HSBC Wakeboard World Cup.

Below: Philip Soven, 16, takes to the air and sweeps the championship title from the hands of his closest rival Jeff Weatherall. The two men were head-to-head in a close contest in the HSBC Wakeboard World Cup.

Sasha Christian, 11, is the youngest wakeboarder to represent Singapore in an international event.

Above: From left to right: Nediva Divya Singam, 8, with her mother Monica and brother Ruben Hemant Singam, 7, celebrating Deepavali at home. On the floor is a Rangoli made up of broken rice arranged in a floral pattern. Hindus celebrate Deepavali or the festival of lights every year and an important practice is to light lamps to mark the triumph of good over evil.

Below: The annual Deepavali lights up at Little India.

HAPPY
DEEPAVALI

A City Aglow

In recent years, Singapore's streets have become more and more brightly illuminated after dark. In October this year, night lighting reached a new height of brilliance in many parts of Singapore's city centre.

Singapore's population is about 77 per cent Chinese, 14 per cent Malay and 8 per cent Indian. Street light-ups to celebrate major festivals of the various ethnic groups have become part of the country's landscape and events calendar, something to look forward to for residents and visitors alike. But this year was extra special with not two, but three, festivals happening in the same month – Deepavali, Hari Raya Puasa and the Mid-Autumn Festival.

These three festivals are based on lunar calendars and normally do not fall within the same month. The Mid-Autumn Festival usually occurs in September, while Deepavali usually falls in October or November. However, due to a leap seventh month in the Chinese lunar calendar this year, the Mid-Autumn Festival was one month later than usual. Hari Raya, which takes place in a different month every year, was coincidentally in October this year as well.

In Chinatown, as part of the celebrations leading up to the Mid-Autumn Festival on October 6, moving giant lanterns strung in the sky added a dynamic aspect to the festive revelry of the crowd thronging among the 300 stalls and stage shows in the streets below.

At Little India, 244 colourful peacocks made from glittering lights donned the streets in anticipation of Deepavali on October 21. Besides heritage exhibitions and bazaars, the highlight was a street parade that featured 25 contingents and 350 performers, including the traditional fire-walking procession.

Over at Kampong Glam and Geylang Serai, 600 neon bulbs crafted into three symbols – a mosque dome, star and flower – spiced up the festivities at the 120-booth street bazaar and stage performances as the Malay community celebrated Hari Raya.

Both locals and tourists gave the light-ups two thumbs up, for the way they helped people appreciate other cultures.

Madam Rekha Bhatnagar from Bangalore, who visited Chinatown during the festival, said: "The decorations are very good, very different. It makes the places look so chirpy."

Above: Chinatown Mid-Autumn Festival 2006 Street light-up.

Below: These men dressed in their Hari Raya finery, led by Ustaz Sallim Jasman, called on four households to recite a 10-minute takbir. At the fourth house, the host set up a tentage and a buffet of traditional Malay dishes. The act celebrates the end of fasting month and marks the beginning of Sywal, the month of Hari Raya Puasa.

INTELLI ISLAND

Recently, Singapore celebrated a quarter century of investing in building up the national digital information and communications infrastructure (or "infocomm" for short) – and announced many initiatives to take this even further.

Efforts in this area have certainly come a long way. Some among the present "e-generation" (those who grew up in the Internet age) of Singaporeans might find it hard to believe that in the 1970s and early '80s, computers were a rarity in Singapore. They were mostly found at the Finance Ministry and at public sector agencies such as the Port of Singapore Authority and Public Utilities Board. Most government ministries had to go to the Finance Ministry to get their computing done.

The National Computer Board was then formed to lead the country into this new field and it took the bold step of computerising 10 ministries at one go. People picked up technical skills from these projects and others were sent abroad for computer science training. Computer professionals were also hired from overseas to work on various projects. These measures would later prove to be fundamental to the rapid-growth years of the '80s and '90s.

In the early days of the new millennium, the "dotcom boom" came and went and the information technology (IT) industry saw the emergence of a new buzzword – convergence. The coming together of computing, communications and content gave rise to new digital services,

GENT

and saw the IT industry evolve to embrace infocomm technology, taking into account the mushrooming of communications and content elements.

The National Computer Board became the Infocomm Development Authority (IDA) when it merged with the Telecommunication Authority of Singapore to better take charge of the issues thrown up by

convergence. The industry also expanded with total revenue hitting $40 billion.

The IDA recently celebrated 25 years of infocomm building with an exhibition which charted Singapore's development in this field. At the National Infocomm Awards 2006 gala dinner, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong unveiled a $135 million project aimed at bringing IT even closer

to all Singaporeans.

In his speech, PM Lee reflected on those years when the public sector owned only two mainframe computers and the "leap of faith into the unknown" when Singapore decided to scale up on technology use in 1981.

By getting government agencies to adopt technology and exposing the young to it, the country got set for the digital age
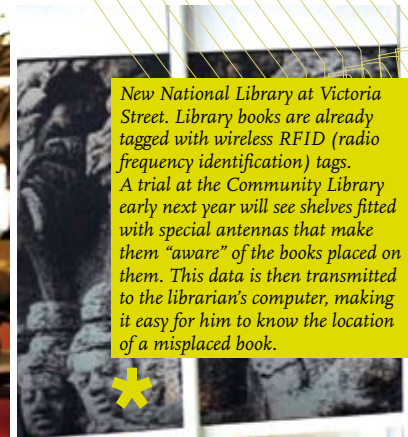
and plugged itself into the global grid.

He added that the key to reaping "digital dividends" is to adopt the typical Singapore approach to stay ahead of trends that may not always be clear. "By the time a trend becomes obvious to everyone, we may have already missed the boat."
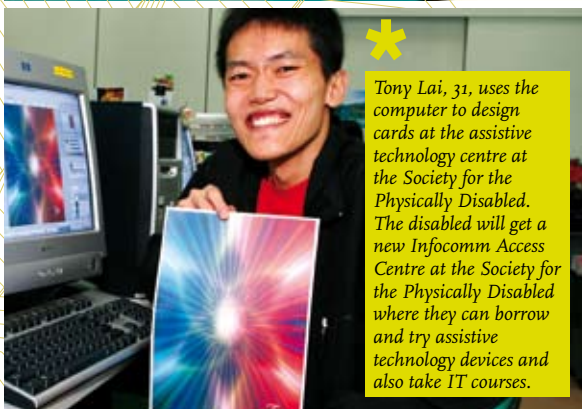
The following are some highlights of the new initiatives:

McDonald's fast-food chain will now have Wireless Internet, or Wi-Fi, services at most of its 125 outlets.

New National Library at Victoria Street. Library books are already tagged with wireless RFID (radio frequency identification) tags. A trial at the Community Library early next year will see shelves fitted with special antennas that make them "aware" of the books placed on them. This data is then transmitted to the librarian's computer, making it easy for him to know the location of a misplaced book.

Tony Lai, 31, uses the computer to design cards at the assistive technology centre at the Society for the Physically Disabled. The disabled will get a new Infocomm Access Centre at the Society for the Physically Disabled where they can borrow and try assistive technology devices and also take IT courses.

Students from Canberra Secondary School using digital media to encourage an appreciation of the creative arts.

FREE INTERNET IN PUBLIC PLACES

Starting next year, the public will be treated to free wireless broadband access, with speeds of up to 512 kilobits per second in public areas such as the Central Business District, the main shopping street Orchard Road and public housing town centres all over the island. This will enable people to log on to the Internet without a fixed cable connection. The number of wireless hot spots in Singapore will increase fivefold from 900 to 5,000.

With broadband Internet access available at so many places, the number of "on-the-go" surfers is expected to shoot up from today's 50,000 to 250,000 within two years. This offer will last for at least two years and serves as a push to bridge the digital divide and for all Singaporeans to become part of the digital age.

COMPUTER SUBSIDIES FOR THE NEEDY

Following the success of the existing "Neu PC" scheme, which has provided 20,000 needy families with computers at subsidised prices over the past six years, PM Lee introduced the "Neu PC Plus" scheme, to enable another 10,000 needy households with school-going children to own a computer that will come with three years of unlimited broadband access for less than $300.

In addition, the newly created "iNSPIRE Fund" will help needy students co-pay for their computers. IDA will provide $2 for every dollar donated to the fund by the industry.

INFOCOMM ACCESS FOR DISABLED AND AGED

The IDA and the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports will be setting up a $4 million Infocomm Accessibility Centre on the premises of the Society of the Physically Disabled in the first quarter of 2007. The centre will have a range of assistive-technology tools so that disabled people can use computers to learn and interact with other people. The facilities will also provide training and employment opportunities such as web design and data administration.

For the elderly who are interested in becoming more tech-savvy and want to try out common Internet activities like instant messaging and web-surfing, the government will also roll out more workshops and programmes to cater to them.

INTERACTIVE AND DIGITAL MEDIA R&D

As part of its plan to strengthen Singapore's overall infocomm capabilities, the government will be placing a focus on the interactive and digital media (IDM) industry. The Media Development Authority (MDA) hopes to accelerate the growth of the IDM industry to generate a value-added contribution of $10 billion and add around 10,000 new jobs by 2015.

To oversee research and development (R&D) in the IDM industry, a new IDM R&D Programme Office will be set up – a multi-agency effort consisting of members from the Economic Development Board, IDA, A*Star (Agency for Science, Technology And Research), Ministry of Education and Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts. The office is also in charge of $500 million allocated earlier by the National Research Foundation, a national body coordinating the country's R&D investment, for R&D in the IDM industry over the next five years.

WIRELESS IN SINGAPORE

In some places, including Singapore, they are commonly found in barcodes in libraries for checking-out and returning books.

Many countries embed them in passports to record the travel history of their citizens.

Night clubs in Spain and the Netherlands implant them under the skin of customers to identify those who are VIPs, who in turn use them to pay for drinks.

Scanning of pallets using RFID chips. Singapore is opening a National RFID Centre to quicken the adoption of wireless tags for logistics tracking, for example, among businesses here.

WHAT IS THIS NEW TECHNOLOGY? — RFID TAGS

RFID (radio frequency identification) is a data collection technology that uses electronic tags for storing data. As seen in the examples above, it has gained widespread popularity around the world and is fast becoming part of the way people live, work and play.

RFID is an area that Singapore is investing actively in, as part of the country's efforts to keep applying the latest technologies wherever they can enhance the standard of living.

Singapore's Land Transport Authority employs RFID in "EZ-Link cards" to facilitate the use of public transport on buses and trains. Passengers need only tap their cards against a card-reader on boarding and alighting to have their travel fares automatically calculated and deducted.

The country's renowned Electronic Road Pricing (ERP) system regulates traffic into crowded downtown areas by using overhead gantry equipment to detect and deduct the toll off RFID tags embedded in "stored-value" cards installed in all vehicles.

In an effort to further boost Singapore's status as a centre for high-tech supply chain management, the government has set up a national centre to promote the use of wireless RFID tags. The National RFID Centre enables companies to learn from others that have already adopted the technology. It is also positioned to help generate $300 million of RFID business over the next five years.
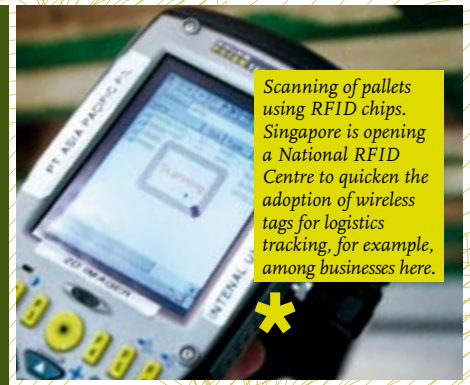
Speaking at the opening of the new centre, the Minister of State for Trade and Industry, Mr S Iswaran, said that more companies here should progress from running trials to deploying the technology fully. He added that RFID should be widely employed for tracking goods, particularly as Asia becomes an important manufacturing base over the next decade.

Since 2004, the Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*STAR) and the Infocomm Development Authority have set aside $20 million to fund RFID trials here. These two agencies, together with the Standards, Productivity and Innovation Board (Spring Singapore) and the Economic Development Board, have been the driving forces behind the new centre.

NEW USES FOR WIRELESS TAGS

* Sengkang Community Library to be wired up early next year with "smart shelves" that are "aware" of books and can track which titles are in stock.
* Electronics retailer BiG Megastore to create a showflat to demonstrate how wireless tags can be used to create a "smart home" with devices that can be activated by RFID tags.
* The Institute of Microelectronics to develop a low-cost RFID reader with local firm SmartID.
* Logistics firm DHL to use wireless tags to trace drugs used for clinical trials.

SINGAPORE–MIT GAME LAB

An agreement was signed between MDA and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a top research university in the United States, to establish the Singapore-MIT International Game Lab (SMIGL) to research the digital gaming industry.

SMIGL will bridge some 300 students and researchers in Singapore with researchers at MIT and game industry professionals on international research projects over the next five years.

Ministry of Sound: A first on the Singapore club scene, the radio tag wristbands, which double as membership cards, have been designed to carry a radio frequency identification (RFID) chip, which will allow members to enter the club by tapping their wristbands at the self-service kiosk in the priority queue.

Digital Opportunities for All

By Lee Hsien Loong

We aim to create digital opportunities for all Singaporeans, and not allow a digital divide in our society... with many helping hands, we can reach out to more Singaporeans, and equip everyone to take full advantage of the digital opportunities that are opening up.

Singapore has come a long way in exploiting IT and making it a pervasive part of our lives. From having practically no IT industry, Singapore is now a global leader in e-Government and host to a thriving infocomm industry with nearly $40 billion in annual revenues.

Looking ahead, the Infocomm Development Authority (IDA) of Singapore had sourced inputs in the past year from the private, public and people sectors to formulate a masterplan to sharpen Singapore's infocomm and economic competitiveness in the next decade. The masterplan is coined "Intelligent Nation 2015". In the plan, Singapore's infocomm infrastructure will be improved to include a new ultra-high-speed network linking every home and office, a wireless broadband network that allows Singaporeans to stay connected even while on the go, as well as supporting infrastructure for e-identity, e-payments and cyber-security. When completed, this Next-Generation Infrastructure will be a critical enabler to build new capabilities and transform our industries. It will help to jumpstart an exciting host of new applications and high-growth sectors that rely on broadband – from immersive learning and high definition video, to telemedicine and grid computing.

Singapore will invest $500 million into R&D initiatives to strengthen our infocomm capabilities, especially in the area of interactive and digital media (IDM). R&D projects will reap benefits in many areas, such as education, for instance through a joint programme by MOE and IDA to develop "Schools of the Future", whereby infocomm will be integrated holistically into every aspect of the school environment to make learning come to life. A strong and vibrant infocomm sector will also create many new jobs for Singaporeans. Countries in Southeast Asia, China, India and the Middle East who are also keen to learn about our experience with e-Government will also benefit.

We have also planned to broaden the opportunities for all segments of the population to access and benefit from technology as we move forward in the digital age. We aim to create digital opportunities for all Singaporeans, and not allow a digital divide in our society. Hence the Next-Generation Infocomm Infrastructure will also be made readily accessible to all Singaporeans. From January next year, public areas with high human traffic, such as the Business District, Downtown and HDB town centres, will have free wireless broadband connections for at least 2 years. Thereafter, consumers can enjoy high speed connection to the internet, send out instant messages and check emails, and even make VOIP (voice-over-IP) calls.

In addition, more targeted assistance to help needy Singaporeans make full use of infocomm will also be provided. For most Singaporeans, access to computers and broadband is no longer a luxury. Most school-going children have computers at home, but 14% of households still do not. IDA currently runs a "NEU PC" scheme that offers needy families PCs at highly subsidised prices. More than 20,000 families have benefited from this scheme over the last 6 years. Going forward, the Government will enhance this scheme to benefit more needy families. With this "NEU PC Plus" scheme, students from low-income families can look forward to a brand new computer for less than $300, bundled with 3 years of unlimited broadband access.

We are also paying attention to older Singaporeans and the disabled community. Infocomm can help them contribute meaningfully to society and stay connected with their family and friends. IDA will work closely with the grassroots organisations to help less tech-savvy senior citizens get connected to the internet. IDA is also working with MCYS, VWOs and industry partners to provide infocomm training for those with disabilities and create employment opportunities for them.

IDA and the infocomm industry has also set up an "iNspire Fund" to help needy students. For every dollar raised by the industry, IDA will match with two dollars. With many helping hands, we can reach out to more Singaporeans, and equip everyone to take full advantage of the digital opportunities that are opening up.

Extracted from a speech by Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the Innovationation Gala Dinner in celebration of 25 years of Infocomm and the National Infocomm awards, 10 October 2006, at the Singapore Expo