



**Convention on the
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COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Thirty-fourth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 909th MEETING

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva,
on Friday, 26 September 2003, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Mr. DOEK

CONTENTS

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS OF STATES PARTIES (continued)

Initial report of Singapore (continued)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS OF STATES PARTIES (agenda item 4) (continued)

Initial report of Singapore (continued) (CRC/C/51/Add.8; CRC/C/Q/SGP/1; CRC/C/RESP/43)

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, Ms. ANG, Mr. CHAN, Ms. CHIA, Ms. ONG, Ms. SEAH, Mr. Alfred TAN, Mr. Anthony TAN, Mr. TANG and Ms. YEOH took places at the Committee table.
2. Mr. FILALI said that the Constitution of Singapore did not appear to respect the best interests of the child when it allowed children to be deprived of their citizenship if their father renounced his. He enquired whether the High Court applied a special juvenile code to minors who were being prosecuted for serious offences. Minors should not be subjected to such forms of corporal punishment as caning at home or in institutions, even if lighter canes were used for children. Minors, including those considered dangerous, should not be held in the same detention facilities as adults. Children in Singapore should not be allowed to remain with their mothers in prison until the age of 3 or older because prison was not a proper environment for a child's physical and psychological development.
3. It was not clear what bilateral arrangements Singapore had made with other countries regarding the recovery of child maintenance, nor how maintenance orders made by the courts of other countries were enforced in Singapore. The fact that criminal legislation pertaining to minors in Singapore was not retroactive was incompatible with the general principles of criminal law. In cases where a new law was more favourable than the old law, the new law should prevail. The delegation should provide information on the results of the Government's education programmes relating to the family.
4. Mr. LIWSKI asked how Singapore's various complaints mechanisms for children processed complaints, and what were the main types of complaints.
5. Ms. ANG (Singapore) said that in Singapore all reported cases of child abuse were investigated. Singapore's legislation clearly defined parents' childcare responsibilities and prescribed heavy penalties for child abuse.
6. The term "caning", which referred to the judicious use of a light cane applied to the palm of the hand, was practised by some parents, usually as a last resort. The maxim "spare the rod and spoil the child" was popular among many Singaporeans of various faiths and ethnic groups. Although the Government's parent-education programmes discouraged caning and spanking and focused on alternative methods of discipline, public opinion remained divided on the issue.
7. In schools, corporal punishment was administered as a last resort and only to male pupils. The Ministry of Education had issued strict guidelines on corporal punishment in schools, and only the principal or teachers authorized by the principal could administer it. School authorities were mindful that the school was primarily a place to nurture children and that disciplinary

measures should not erode pupils' dignity or self-esteem. Caning, as a court sentence, was very different from caning used by parents or in schools, and required compliance with established guidelines.

8. The CHAIRPERSON enquired whether the low number of complaints of child abuse and neglect received in 2002 reflected a reluctance to report cases.

9. Ms. ANG (Singapore) said that the relatively low figures reflected the fact that child abuse and neglect in Singapore was not a major problem. Of the complaints registered, one third appeared to involve genuine child-protection issues; another third concerned less serious disciplinary issues; and the last third constituted unjustifiable complaints by neighbours.

10. Mr. Anthony TAN (Singapore) said that the Children and Young Persons Act specified that superintendents and staff of institutions caring for children should make every effort to enforce discipline without resorting to caning. Strict regulations governed the use of caning, which could be administered only after an inquiry had revealed that the child was guilty of serious misconduct. The child's parents or guardians were immediately informed of the disciplinary action taken. Superintendents were required to record the decision to use punishment in a discipline book, which was open to the scrutiny of a board of visitors made up of community leaders appointed by the Government.

11. The Children and Young Persons Act specified that only the High Court could sentence a child to corporal punishment. Caning as a court-ordered punishment was restricted to males and was administered for serious offences. Under the Criminal Procedure Code, no person 18 years or under was liable to capital punishment. Although the Children and Young Persons Act provided that males between the ages of 7 and 16 could be sentenced to light caning, the practice was rarely employed. There were clear and detailed guidelines for the use of court-ordered caning or light caning as a form of punishment in juvenile rehabilitation centres. Those who failed to follow such guidelines were subject to severe disciplinary measures.

12. Mr. TANG (Singapore) said that, even though the Government was not an actual provider of pre-school education, it was committed to ensuring that all children had access to quality pre-school education. The Government offered various financial assistance schemes for pre-school education to children from low-income families. Professional requirements for pre-school teachers had been established and specifications for pre-school curricula had recently been developed. Approximately 99 per cent of Singapore's children had access to pre-school education.

13. The exemption of disabled children from the Compulsory Education Act meant that such children were not required to enter mainstream schools. However, many programmes had been implemented to stimulate interaction between children in special schools and those in mainstream schools. The Government and the community provided each disabled child with up to four times the resources needed to educate a child in a mainstream primary school. The Government also provided resources and facilities to enable children with physical disabilities to attend mainstream schools. One out of six primary schools, and one out of seven secondary

schools, were fully equipped to handle the needs of such children. Efforts had been made to ensure that there was one such school within 5 kilometres of each disabled child's home. When children were registered for primary school, all children, including children with disabilities, were enrolled in an institution capable of meeting their particular needs.

14. Experience had shown that home schooling was provided by parents who were committed to their children's education and believed that they could offer them a better education than could mainstream schools. Such parents were often highly educated and some were former teachers. There were various ways of ensuring that home-schooled children received a quality education. Parents were required to submit an application to the Ministry of Education describing their reasons for home schooling, the curriculum they intended to teach and, if their application was approved, regular reports of their children's progress. Home-schooled children had to pass the same primary-school leaving examination that was administered to children in mainstream schools.

15. The non-citizens in the Singaporean education system who paid higher fees were not children of immigrant workers but foreign students who were usually not accompanied by their parents.

16. Education in Singapore was designed to inculcate a respect for differences, responsibility towards family and community and a spirit of innovation and continual improvement. Classes in civics and moral education were part of Singapore's national curriculum and focused on the need to respect the basic rights of the individual, the rights and responsibilities of citizens and the fundamental liberties safeguarded by the Constitution of Singapore. Efforts were made to promote racial and religious harmony among students.

17. Stress was a necessary part of education. The approach taken in Singapore was to balance the demands of the educational system with stress-management techniques. A multi-tiered system of counselling at all levels helped teachers to identify students who were unable to cope with stress. A preventive programme on stress and anger management had been set up in primary schools, while a secondary school programme focused on stress management, depression and self-esteem. All teachers were taught basic counselling skills. Pupils with difficult problems were referred to teacher counsellors, who provided more advanced counselling skills and crisis intervention. Particularly serious cases were referred to the educational psychologists attached to the Ministry of Education, or to external counsellors. The Government had issued pamphlets on stress management, and there was a hotline for schoolchildren with problems. The causes of stress included relationship problems, failure to meet one's own and one's parents' expectations, and dysfunctional families. Most of the calls received by the hotline dealt with boy/girl and peer relationships; school problems accounted for only 17 per cent of the calls.

18. The Government believed that quality education was the best gift that it could offer to its children. Placing a child in a class where the pace of learning did not match his or her ability could be very stressful for the child. The authorities endeavoured to cater to each child's needs and allow pupils to learn at their own pace.

19. Ms. VUCKOVIC-SAHOVIC enquired whether there was a school dress code and, if so, whether it allowed children to exercise their freedom of expression and freedom of religion.
20. Ms. SMITH said that she would be interested in knowing whether a child of highly ambitious parents could face difficulties at home if he or she was not placed in a programme for high achievers.
21. Mr. TANG (Singapore) said that approximately 2 per cent of each age cohort at the primary level (about 1,000 children) did not attend a national school. Most of those children had been officially exempted from national education, either because they were registered at a religious or a special needs school or because they were taught at home. Some of those children attended school abroad. Government officials investigated all cases involving children who did not have a valid reason for not registering at school.
22. All schoolchildren were required to wear a school uniform, except on the occasional “dress down” day. A recent survey had revealed that most children preferred to wear a school uniform.
23. Approximately 8 per cent of young people dropped out of secondary school. In order to reduce the dropout rate, efforts had been made to design a curriculum that allowed children to progress at their own pace. Teachers played an important role in providing guidance to pupils who were at risk of dropping out of school.
24. Mr. CHAN (Singapore) said that the Government of Singapore was satisfied with the pre-primary educational facilities provided by private, religious, community and voluntary organizations. While the Government did not consider it necessary to assume full responsibility for pre-primary education, it took measures to ensure that high standards were maintained.
25. Ms. CHIA (Singapore) said that the Breastfeeding Mothers’ Support Group worked together with the Health Promotion Board to encourage mothers to breastfeed for up to one year. The Group received strong support from the staff of both private and public hospitals and clinics. Measures had been taken to prevent the distribution of milk samples to mothers of newborns in hospitals and clinics. The Health Promotion Board had encouraged employers to provide breastfeeding rooms in the workplace and to allow mothers time off from work to express breast milk for their babies.
26. The Government had introduced a number of measures to contribute to the costs of child-rearing. Such measures included the Baby Bonus scheme and a scheme that allowed women who were having their third child to claim eight weeks of paid maternity leave.
27. The Government had taken steps to allow its employees to balance their work and family life. For example, all mothers working in the civil service were entitled to unpaid leave of up to four years to care for each of their children, and they were allowed to work part-time for up to three years. Mothers with children aged 6 or under received five fully paid leave days a year for each of their first three children; that enabled them to care for the children when they fell ill. In addition, the Government allowed each employee to take three days of paid marriage leave and allowed male civil servants to take three days of paternity leave for their first three children. Parents with young children were permitted to work from home when that was feasible.

28. The CHAIRPERSON enquired whether the Health Promotion Board's efforts to encourage employers to provide breastfeeding facilities in the workplace had been successful.
29. Ms. AL-THANI asked whether the progress made within the public sector had extended to the private sector. She also wished to know whether Singapore had taken any steps to implement the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative, which had been launched in 1991 by the World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). She wished to know why Singapore had not ratified the International Code of Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes.
30. Ms. CHIA (Singapore) said that a number of employers provided rooms for breastfeeding employees. She would endeavour to find out why Singapore had not ratified the International Code of Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes and would transmit the relevant information to the Committee.
31. Female circumcision was not widespread and was practised only among certain members of Singapore's small Muslim community. The practice was not a major public health concern. The procedure involved the removal of a small piece of skin from the clitoris, usually by female doctors in a sterile and private environment. The rest of the genitalia were left intact. No complications arising from female circumcision had ever been reported to a State-run clinic or hospital. It was not mandatory to report cases of female circumcision to the Ministry of Health.
32. The CHAIRPERSON asked whether there had ever been a debate in Singapore about the fact that female genital mutilation was considered to be a human rights violation under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, to which Singapore was a party.
33. Ms. CHIA (Singapore) said that the human rights aspect of female circumcision had never been raised in Singapore.
34. The obesity rate among schoolchildren in Singapore had dropped to 9.8 per cent in 2002, partly as a result of the Trim and Fit Programme that had been introduced by the Ministry of Education. Under the Programme, all schoolchildren were weighed twice a year. Those who were found to be over or underweight received dietary counselling and were required to exercise. Seriously overweight children were referred to a specialist. Two major paediatric hospitals in Singapore had their own obesity control programmes.
35. Mr. FILALI asked whether female circumcision could be considered an offence under the Penal Code since it violated the right to physical integrity.
36. The CHAIRPERSON enquired whether children were forced to participate in physical exercise under the Trim and Fit Programme.
37. Mr. CHAN (Singapore) said that overweight children were required to participate in early-morning exercise classes and were not allowed to eat snacks at school. The parents of overweight children received counselling on how to help their children lose weight.
38. Mr. Alfred TAN said that the Singapore Children's Society operated a national helpline for children under 12 years old. Trained volunteers provided advice to distressed children. Although school-related stress was one reason for calling the helpline, most calls were from

children who felt lonely or bored. The second most common reason for contacting the helpline was peer relationship problems. Volunteers encouraged children to make better use of their spare time and helped them to deal with problems that they would encounter later in life. Children were also given advice on how to develop their self-esteem. The Singapore Children's Society also organized after-school discussion groups to give children an opportunity to express their views.

39. The CHAIRPERSON said that he would be interested in knowing whether the helpline staff were able to follow up individual cases.

40. Mr. Alfred TAN (Singapore) said that social workers and counsellors were directly involved in dealing with children's complaints and would often meet the child in question to discuss his or her problem and work out a solution.

41. Ms. ANG (Singapore) said that the Government's multidisciplinary approach to children with disabilities was based on early detection and intervention. Data collected by the National Birth Defect Registry were used to prepare early intervention programmes. In 2003, the Government had earmarked 17.5 million Singapore dollars (S\$) for a new programme for children with mental disabilities. Child development clinics would be set up in two major general hospitals with a view to ensuring early detection of developmental problems. Over the next five years, the Government planned to allocate S\$ 24 million to an integrated childcare programme for children from 2 to 6 years of age, and to early intervention programmes for disabled children under 6 years of age. Substantial resources were also being allocated to teacher training. Parents received information concerning long-term care and treatment options and were encouraged to form support groups.

42. In 2002, the 1990 Code on Barrier-Free Accessibility in Buildings had been revised to include guidelines for creating a barrier-free environment for children with disabilities and families with young children. Children with disabilities had access to arts, cultural and recreational programmes. Transport arrangements were made to ensure that children could attend programmes that were suitable for them. The Very Special Arts association organized special arts and cultural programmes for children with disabilities. Some of the children performed in regional and international programmes.

43. Ms. ONG (Singapore) said that the Maintenance Orders (Facilities for Enforcement) Act ensured that maintenance orders made in other Commonwealth countries were recognized and enforced in Singapore. The Maintenance Orders (Reciprocal Enforcement) Act ensured the recognition and enforcement of maintenance orders made in non-Commonwealth countries that had signed a bilateral agreement with Singapore. Maintenance orders made in countries that had not signed a bilateral agreement with Singapore could also be enforced.

44. In Singapore, female genital mutilation was not a criminal offence. However, the act itself could constitute an offence under section 350 of the Penal Code.

45. The CHAIRPERSON asked whether a child whose father had renounced his Singapore citizenship also lost his or her citizenship.

46. Mr. Anthony TAN (Singapore) said that careful consideration was given to the facts and circumstances of the case before the child was deprived of his or her citizenship. In any case, the provision was rarely used in Singapore.

47. Ms. YEOH (Singapore) said that, under the Enlistment Act, the compulsory enlistment age for national service was 18. Persons between 16¹/₂ and 18 years of age could volunteer for national service under the Voluntary Early Enlistment Scheme. The Scheme had been designed to facilitate the transition of young persons to the workforce or to further education after they completed full-time national service. Early enlistees underwent a series of medical and psychological tests before they were recruited. The early enlistment application form had to be signed both by the volunteer and by his or her parents.

48. Dual-income families were becoming the norm in Singapore. The Government worked with the community and the private sector to provide a range of family-support services. Unlike childcare services, student care services were not licensed. However, steps had been taken to develop and promote best practice guidelines for student care centres. The Government hoped to set up an accreditation system with a view to monitoring standards in such centres.

49. In cooperation with the Singapore National Employers Federation and the National Trades Union Congress, the Government promoted family-friendly work practices, such as the establishment of lactation rooms for mothers. A paid third child maternity leave scheme had recently been introduced, and the National Family-Friendly Firm Award was becoming increasingly prestigious among employers.

50. Increasingly, the views of Singaporean children were being taken into consideration. The Government took an open and consultative approach to decision-making. For example, an online consultation portal enabled the general public, including children, to comment on draft government policies and initiatives. The statement on the best interests of the child, which had been jointly developed by the Ministry of Community Development and Sports and the National Council of Social Service, had been posted on the portal for comments.

51. A pre-university seminar, in which junior college students, public-sector officials and private-sector executives came together to discuss the concerns of Singaporean youth, was held once a year. In 2003, over 500 students had participated in the seminar.

52. In schools, students expressed their views by writing articles in school newspapers and participating in various forums. Student counsellors represented the students and helped to develop school rules and regulations. The Ministry of Community Development and Sports was promoting an annual forum on the best interests of the child with a view to encouraging children's participatory rights.

53. Mr. Anthony TAN (Singapore) said that the provision that permitted children under 3 years of age to stay with their incarcerated parents was rarely applied. The family of the incarcerated parent was dissuaded from allowing the child to be kept in prison. All other options, such as placing of the child with the extended family, had to be exhausted before the child was permitted to live with the incarcerated parent. The provision was sometimes applied

when children of foreign inmates could not be repatriated to their country of origin. However, even when a non-Singaporean child had to be incarcerated with a parent, the Prisons Department continued to work with the embassy of the country concerned in order to ensure the child's speedy repatriation.

54. Ms. ANG (Singapore) said that parents were advised to seek help for troublesome children as soon as possible. The Government ensured that counselling and information services were easily accessible at the regional and local levels. Currently, there were about 35 family service centres and 10 youth centres. Only rarely did parents have to seek help from a juvenile court. The juvenile court system was child-friendly, and juvenile court magistrates sought to help parents to strengthen their relationship with their children. In very few cases were formal proceedings necessary. Most children were referred to a non-governmental organization (NGO) for counselling and were subsequently monitored to ensure that their relationship with their parents improved.

55. Ms. Yanghee LEE asked whether minors were ever held in detention with adults.

56. Ms. ORTIZ expressed concern that adopted children were not receiving sufficient protection in Singapore. She wished to know whether the approval to enter Singapore, referred to in paragraph 254 of the report, pertained to children who had already been adopted by a Singaporean couple. By acceding to the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in respect of Intercountry Adoption, the Government would be in a position to ensure that Singapore's legislation was in conformity with that Convention.

57. Ms. OUEDRAOGO asked how the delegation had prepared for its meeting with the Committee and how it planned to disseminate information on the discussion that had been held when it returned to Singapore.

58. Ms. VUCKOVIC-SAHOVIC asked whether the general trend was to promote foster care rather than institutional care. She wished to know whether children with disciplinary problems were placed in the same institutions as children deprived of a family environment. She would be interested to learn whether NGOs were entitled to receive funding from private or foreign sources. The delegation should explain how Singapore demonstrated its commitment to improving the lives of children worldwide.

59. Ms. ANG (Singapore) said that two State-run children's homes existed for children with a history of criminal behaviour. Children deprived of a family environment were placed in separate institutions operated by NGOs, such as Save the Children. The authorities endeavoured to return children who had been placed in institutions to a family environment as soon as possible. To that end, children were encouraged to maintain regular contact with their families or other persons who were as close as family members, through visits and home leave. A day-release scheme enabled older children to return to the community for vocational training and other activities. Foster parents underwent careful screening procedures to ensure their suitability, and foster care was increasingly preferred to institutionalization.

60. Ms. ORTIZ asked whether children were taken into foster care on a temporary or a permanent basis.

61. Ms. ANG (Singapore) said that foster care was usually a temporary arrangement. Whenever possible, children were returned to their biological parents. The Adoption of Infants Act regulated conditions of adoption, and the Director of Social Welfare was responsible for reviewing each case to ensure that adoption was in the best interests of the child. The Family Court could be called upon to decide whether adoption was appropriate.
62. The Government provided a network of Child Care Centres to help working parents with alternative day-care arrangements. The Baby Bonus scheme was designed to help parents meet the additional cost of raising a second or third child..
63. Mr. Anthony TAN (Singapore) said that the juvenile justice system placed emphasis on rehabilitation rather than punishment. Most young offenders were released on probation, while Reformatory Training Centres, administered by the Prisons Department, were designed for violent or unruly offenders. Juveniles guilty of the most serious offences could be sentenced to prison, where they were housed in separate blocks from adults. Prison authorities carefully screened adult inmates who came into contact with juveniles during group activities, such as religious ceremonies. The completion of a new prison complex in 2008 would allow for segregation between adult and juvenile inmates at all times.
64. The CHAIRPERSON asked whether Singapore was planning to ratify the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in respect of Intercountry Adoption, and whether the Government had considered intercountry adoption as a way of addressing the problem of an ageing population.
65. Ms. ANG (Singapore) said that the Government was examining the possibility of accession to the Hague Convention. Singapore's national population policy did not make any provision for intercountry adoption.
66. Ms. SEAH (Singapore) said that the Government provided international development assistance in areas of special expertise, such as human resources development, port and airport management and urban planning. Within the framework of the South-East Asian Ministers of Education Organization, Singapore took part in activities designed to enhance regional cooperation in culture, science and education. A coalition of schools from around the region had been established with a view to sharing best practices and building contacts between students. The Government also ran a scholarship programme to assist students from other Asian countries who came to study in Singapore.
67. The Singapore International Foundation had undertaken several humanitarian relief missions involving volunteer doctors and nurses. It also operated youth programmes for community projects in developing countries. In 2001, the Government had allocated a total of S\$ 260 million to international development assistance.
68. Ms. ANG (Singapore) said that NGOs were entitled to receive external funding, although the Government also had a duty to contribute to NGO activities, through co-financing and human development training.

69. Ms. Yanghee LEE said that, although caning was not always as harsh a punishment as it might sound, any form of corporal punishment was cruel and degrading. The State party should consider withdrawing its reservations and declarations and ratifying the two optional protocols to the Convention. It should incorporate an awareness of basic human rights into its education system, and ensure that its funds and programmes for children became more rights-based. Lastly, she hoped that the concluding observations of the Committee would be disseminated as widely as possible in the national media.

70. Mr. CHAN (Singapore) said that Singapore's declarations and reservations to the Convention should not be viewed as a lack of commitment but rather as an honest appraisal of its current capabilities. Nevertheless, prior to the submission of its next periodic report, the Government would review all of its declarations and reservations and consider ratifying the optional protocols.

71. As a child, he had accepted corporal punishment as a part of growing up. However, societies had to move with the times; that was why the approach to caning and spanking was currently under review.

The meeting rose at 5.20 p.m.