



(Right, from left) CJ Chan, Prof Jayakumar and Prof Beckman viewing the maps outside the new centre yesterday. In his speech, Prof Jayakumar said that Singapore is plugged into the global system, and thus cannot remain on the sidelines of international law-making.

(Above, from left) Justice Chao Hick Tin, Prof Woon, Mr S. Tiwari and Prof Koh participating in a colloquium at the launch of the CIL yesterday. ST PHOTOS: TERENCE TAN



NUS opens new law centre

Focus is on research in international law

By SUJIN THOMAS

MINISTRIES and agencies here should make an effort to build expertise in international law, so Singapore can play a part in shaping legislation which affects the country.

Speaking at the launch of the Centre for International Law (CIL) at the National University of Singapore's Bukit Timah Campus, Senior Minister and Coordinating Minister for National Security Professor S. Jayakumar made clear that as a small country, Singapore is plugged into the global system, and thus cannot remain on the sidelines of international law-making.

"All officials need to be conscious that every step or decision, every act or omission they make may have legal implications, even many years after the fact," he added.

He cited as an example how even soldiers sent abroad by the Defence Ministry on peacekeeping efforts must be clear on their obligations and authority under international law.

Prof Jayakumar noted that since international legal norms govern much of the free trade, investment and even air services agreements that Singapore has, the country needs to make a coordinated effort to develop expertise in this area, and in the process, help shape such norms.

To build this expertise, Singapore needs to adopt a three-pronged strategy.

First, every government agency, not just the Attorney-General's Chambers and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, must make an effort to develop international law expertise.

Giving young talents early exposure is also key, he said. Using himself and Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh as examples, he said their early exposure to international law stood Singapore in good stead when the sovereignty claim on Pedra Branca came up.

Their past experience, he said, gave them an invaluable edge. "We were able to apply our legal knowledge in actual practice to protect and advance Singapore's interests," he said.

The challenge before Singapore, said Prof Jayakumar, was to "develop the next generation of Tommy Kohs, so that we have a sufficiently large pool of talented international law practitioners to respond to new emerging challenges in the future".

Finally, resources must be exchanged between academia and those who practise international law, to further build expertise.

Going forward, Prof Jayakumar said the CIL and Singapore could help give Asia a voice in international law.

Noting that the field is largely a Western monopoly today, dominated by legal practitioners from the United States and Europe, he said: "International law cannot call itself 'international' without the voice of Asia.

"To change the current situation may seem to be a tall order, but I hope that in time, we will see a new generation of Asian international lawyers with a global standing arguing cases before the International Court of Justice and other legal institutions."

Among those present at yesterday's event were Law Minister K. Shanmugam, Attorney-General Walter Woon and Chief Justice Chan Sek Keong.

The CIL aims to be an intellectual hub that will promote international law research in areas such as Asean law and policy as well as education in the region. It will be funded with about \$2 million annually from the Ministry of Finance over the next three years.

CIL director Professor Robert Beckman said the centre will be looking into programmes designed not for lawyers, but to help key government officials understand how international law plays a part when legal issues arise, he added.

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