

Singapore firms 'can play middlemen' in Myanmar

Singapore companies need to position themselves to enter the fray in Myanmar as more countries eye a slice of the economic pie there, a top trade official said.

Melissa Tan

"We have to benchmark ourselves against the competitors... they are all on the sidelines and they are waiting," said Tan Soon Kim, group director for South-east Asia at trade agency IE Singapore. But he warned companies against rushing in blindly.

In this dog-eat-dog game, Singapore is up against seemingly every other developed country.

"The Japanese, for instance, already have a hand in the stock exchange, in the financial sector. The Koreans are also in the energy business," he noted.

Even the Americans and Europeans have suspended their sanctions. Tan said: "They're adopting a wait-and-see attitude, but some of their companies have been approaching me for advice on how to get in."

Despite the fierce competition, Tan said local companies could "take heart in the fact that Singapore is welcome... We are good middlemen, and what Myanmar needs today is to connect with the rest of the world".

Tan was speaking on the sidelines of a seminar yesterday at the Singapore Management University, where IE Singapore presented a white paper on business opportunities in Myanmar.

One attractive sector is hospitality, IE Singapore said, noting that the city-state is the largest player in the hotel industry and the biggest investor in Yangon's three largest hotels: Parkroyal Yangon, Sedona Hotel Yangon and Traders Hotel Yangon.

A dearth of hotel rooms, owing to a surge in visitors as Myanmar gears up to host the 2013 SEA Games and the 2014 Asean summit, has led to room rates tripling in recent months, Tan said, adding he had heard that the wait to get a serviced apartment was "about eight months".