

Singapore bans alcohol in migrant enclave hit by rioting

By Jeremy Grant in Singapore

Singapore's government has said it will "take no chances" on a repeat of last week's riots, the worst social unrest since 1969, describing as a "first step" an alcohol ban this weekend in the enclave where the trouble erupted.

The unrest was sparked after the accidental road death last Sunday night of a 33-year-old Indian national, which led to rioting in the Little India area by about 400 people.

Police have charged 31 foreign workers, mostly Indians, with rioting.

The sale and consumption of alcohol in parts of Little India will be banned this weekend, a time when many foreign workers from south Asia gather in the area on their days off.

K Shanmugam, law minister, said: "We want to go that extra mile to make sure that everything is completely locked down and safe. Primarily, because of the possibility of copycat acts. So you take no chances."

Government officials and labour experts said they had not established a link between the unrest and the conditions under which foreign labourers live and work in Singapore.

Members of an official committee of inquiry set up to investigate the unrest were yesterday appointed by the home affairs ministry. They will report within six months.

Teo Chee Hean, deputy prime minister and minister for home affairs said the members were "experienced with the law, understand security requirements, and are familiar with workers' issues as well as managing relations between the community and workers".

The government has portrayed the unrest as an isolated incident, highlighting the role of drinking by some of the rioters in the area.

Little India has been a bustling enclave of mostly Tamil Indians since British colonial rule in the 19th century. It is also popular with foreign tourists shopping for textiles and jewellery.

However, the incident also has highlighted how Singapore is grappling with its need for foreign workers to sustain its economic suc-

cess while integrating them into the wider community. Of Singapore's 5.3m population, more than 1m are foreigners.

Lee Hsien Loong, prime minister, said on a visit to South Korea that foreign investors were "watching closely" how Singapore was responding.

"[Foreign workers] are here because they are working for us, building trains and houses, working in the shipyards," Mr Lee was quoted in the Business Times, a Singapore publication, as saying. "If we didn't have them, we would not be able to achieve our housing or public transport plans, and Singaporeans would be severely affected. We need the foreign workers, and we have to see how we can manage them better."

Singapore's Land Transport Authority, which manages public transport, has suspended 25 private bus services this Sunday that would normally have ferried thousands of foreign workers to Little India.

Operators of the dormitories which typically house lower-paid overseas work-

'One of the big complaints is that workers don't get the money they were promised'

ers also have been urged by the labour ministry to provide more recreational activities on site.

Labour activists and academics say that foreign workers rarely complain openly about their working conditions in Singapore. The last case of working condition-related action was a strike last year by 171 mainland Chinese bus drivers protesting over living conditions.

But there have been instances of underpayment of wages, and many employers still do not provide pay-slips, says John Gee, chair of the research subcommittee at Transient Workers Count Too, a non-profit group in Singapore.

"One of the big complaints is that workers don't get the money they were promised when they were recruited. They then normally carry debt for at least a year, so they don't get any benefit from their migration," he said.

Improved benefits for all lower-income workers in Singapore are contained in amended employment legislation working its way through parliament, which is dominated by the ruling People's Action party, which Mr Lee leads.

"We need to understand the root causes of workers' strong reaction to the [road] accident," said Eugene Tan, associate professor of law at the Singapore Management University. "The issue of foreign manpower needs urgent action to prevent erosion of business confidence."



Officials assess damaged vehicles in Little India