

Panel seeks to sustain the young's NS commitment

Committee to gather views from national servicemen and the public

By DAVID EE

JUST because older generations may have been committed to national service (NS) does not mean it is inevitable that their children and grandchildren will be too.

And it is up to Singapore to ensure that each new generation finds its own commitment to NS.

This was the message from Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen after the Committee to Strengthen National Service concluded its first meeting at the Basic Military Training Centre in Pulau Tekong yesterday.

Acknowledging that today's younger generation has different aspirations to previous ones, he said the committee will focus on finding out how to maintain and improve the young's dedication.

"Commitment to NS is not something you transmit genetically. Just because you're committed doesn't mean that you can pass your commitment to your children," he said. But he stressed that the problem was not one of flagging commitment, but of how to maintain it by listening to servicemen's concerns and wishes.

With this in mind, the 20-member committee made up of ministers, MPs, top military brass, operationally ready national servicemen and employers will begin its work by spending the next six months holding focus group discussions and town hall sessions across the country.

It will hear views not just from

national servicemen but also from society at large, including parents, employers, new citizens and permanent residents. They may also air their views on a new website - www.strengthenNS.sg - or by e-mail at strengthenNS@starnet.gov.sg

Said Dr Ng: "This is a good time to talk about NS because it is a different generation from the last... If we allow our younger Singaporeans to express in their words and in their own experiences what their fears are, what they wish were better, I think that we can make NS stronger."

Dr Ng, who chairs the committee, announced its formation in Parliament in March. There was robust debate about how to better recognise servicemen in the light of a continued influx of immigrants and the Government's aim to preserve a Singaporean core.

Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC MP Hri Kumar Nair had earlier suggested a national defence tax be levied on non-citizens. But Mr Zainudin Nordin, an MP for the same ward, asked for ways to recognise the sacrifices of servicemen that "speak more to the heart than to the wallet".

A subsequent Straits Times poll of 100 national servicemen found nearly half calling for more monetary incentives - including increased subsidies for housing, transport, education and health. Others in a separate poll asked for time off to rest, with full pay, after their in-camp training.



Dr Ng Eng Hen meeting recruits at the Basic Military Training Centre in Pulau Tekong yesterday. He stressed that the problem is not one of flagging commitment to NS, but of how to maintain it by listening to servicemen's concerns and wishes. ST PHOTO: DESMOND FOO

Committee members come from range of sectors

Government

- Chairman: Dr Ng Eng Hen, Minister for Defence
- Mr Chan Chun Sing, Acting Minister for Social and Family Development, Senior Minister of State for Defence
- Mr Masagos Zulkifli, Senior Minister of State for Home Affairs and Foreign Affairs
- Dr Amy Khor, Minister of State for Health and Manpower, chairman of government feedback unit Reach
- Dr Mohamad Maliki Osman, Senior Parliamentary Secretary for National Development and Defence

- Dr Lim Wee Kiak, chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Defence and Foreign Affairs
- Mr Chan Yeng Kit, Permanent Secretary for Defence Development

Military

- Major-General (MG) Ng Chee Meng, Chief of Defence Force, Singapore



Mr Allan Lim, chief executive officer of Alpha Biofuels and a committee member, felt that all national servicemen understood the need to protect the country.

But he added: "How do we get them to do their best?" The committee will complete its work within a year. Aside from aiming to keep servicemen moti-

Armed Forces (below, left)
 ■ MG Ravinder Singh, Chief of Army, Singapore Armed Forces,

Employers/NSmen/Others

- Mr Suresh Divyanathan, partner, Oon & Bazul
- Mr Andy Lee, founder, Sengkangbabies blog
- Dr Bervyn Lee, director, Office of Student Life, Singapore Management University
- Dr Luisa Lee, president and chief executive, The Farrer Park Company
- Mr Danny Lien, founder and managing director, Amos

International (S)

- Mr Allan Lim, chief executive, Alpha Biofuels
- Mr Lim Jim Koon, editor-in-chief of the Chinese Newspapers Division, Singapore Press Holdings
- Mr Ridzuan Ismail, chief engineer, Catchment & Waterways Department, PUB
- Mr Shaun Seow, chief executive and board director, MediaCorp
- Mr Gerald Singham, partner, Rodyk & Davidson
- Mr Wong Wei Peng, founder, Canact

vated and committed, it seeks to help them balance their duty with family, career and personal needs, and bolster support for NS from the wider community.

"We will implement changes but we want to do them in a careful way that doesn't weaken our NS or our defence," said Dr Ng. daVIDEE@sph.com.sg