

A visit to the Supreme Court in Singapore

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On 17 October 2007 about 50 delegates from the IBA Litigation Committee had the opportunity to visit the Supreme Court of Singapore and to have an exchange with judicial employees of the Court. In 2005, the Supreme Court moved from the former building (Supreme Court and City Hall buildings) into its new premises, which were designed by Foster & Partners, internationally renowned architects.

The Supreme Court of Singapore consists of the High Court and the Court of Appeal. The High Court hears civil and criminal cases, as well as appeals from the Subordinate Courts and High Court registrars. The Court of Appeal deals with appeals from the High Court on both civil and criminal matters.

In 1990 there was a substantial backlog of cases in the Supreme Court. Extensive judicial reforms were introduced, which changed the court culture and introduced new technology into the daily procedures of the Courts. These achievements were enhanced with the move into the new building. Today, it is possible to send documents to Court online 24 hours a day and seven days a week at the click of a button, and to read judgments on the internet shortly after the decision.

An electronic filing system had been introduced in 1997. This system allows lawyers electronically to file, extract and serve documents on multiple parties from their offices. At the same time, it allows hearings to be conducted more effectively by the Court. Touch-screen information kiosks in the court building allow lawyers and the public to obtain up-to-date hearing lists and other court schedules.

With regard to bankruptcy petitions and criminal pre-trial conferences, solicitors can book their hearings via the internet, and the hearings can then be conducted over a videophone without the need for lawyers to be physically present in court.

Although a paperless court is clearly the goal here, and progress to this end is substantial, a practising lawyer in Singapore noted during an evening reception that it is prudent practice to submit the file electronically and to send a hard copy later by post, because a number of

judges prefer to read the details of the case from a paper document and not from the screen.

The courtrooms are equipped with massive technology features. Electrical points are provided in the courtrooms for counsels' laptop computers and other electronic equipment. Online wireless access to the internet as well as to the relevant case law and legislation is available to lawyers throughout the building. Digital photographs, soft copy documents, online resources and DVDs may be broadcast from personal laptops to the monitors in front of the other parties and the judges, as well as to a wall-mounted projection screen. Further, video conferencing facilities are available and a document visualiser can project hard copy documents, physical evidence or negatives onto a large screen.

In addition, a digital audio recording system constitutes the official record of the proceedings. It was mentioned that transcripts are usually available upon request within 24 hours.

Last but not least, a children's corner caters for the needs of lawyers, litigants and witnesses who are unable to make childcare arrangements before attending the court. Childminding services are free of charge.

Does this environment encourage the Court to resolve cases promptly? According to the statistics the answer is yes. In 2006, the Supreme Court received a total of 15,367 new civil and criminal matters. In the same year, a total of 15,018 matters were disposed of. The clearance rate for all matters was 98 per cent. As part of the commitment to the timely resolution of cases, the Supreme Court aims to dispose of 85 per cent of cases within 18 months from the time of filing. This was exceeded in 2006, with 88 per cent having been concluded within 18 months.

Comments on the quality of judicial outcomes in Singapore were, of course, beyond the scope of our tour, which dealt only with procedural matters. From our tour, however, it was clear that Singapore has a Supreme Court which is, in its procedures and infrastructure, truly prepared for the 21st century.