

A BOX FULL OF LOVE



A 'Christmas Wonderland' party, organised by non-profit organisation CityCare for under-privileged kids, featured a giant gift box measuring 4m x 4m x 3.1m, setting a Singapore record yesterday for the Largest Gift Box ever displayed. The box was specially-constructed to hold 500 sponsored Christmas gifts for disadvantaged children. From the looks of things, the spirit of giving is still evident among Singaporeans despite the recession. OOI BOON KEONG

ASEAN CHARTER

The danger in the delay

Former Sec-Gen says early summit vital for group's image

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EVEN as the Association of South-east Asian Nations (Asean) confirmed it had set a date — Monday — to formalise its milestone Charter, the grouping's former Secretary-General has warned that the delayed summit must be held "sooner rather than later", if the world is to see that its leaders are "fully behind" the Charter.

Foreign Ministers of the 10-member grouping will meet in Jakarta on Monday to formalise the Charter.

The Charter was supposed to have been formalised at the 14th Asean Summit, originally scheduled for next week, but that has since been postponed because of the unrest in current Asean chair Thailand.

Mr Ong Keng Yong, Asean's former Secretary-General and now Singapore's Ambassador-At-Large, noted how, during his travels in recent months, he observed that people were "anxious" about implementing the Charter, with all 10 members having ratified it.

"They want the political imprimatur, the actual implementation of the Asean Charter, to get the ball rolling," said Mr Ong, who is also Singapore's non-resident Ambassador to Iran.

"People in business making decisions around the world, need something to see firm action on the part of the 10 governments acting collectively as one unified voice. Some people think this is symbolic; but when you are in this kind of climate, you need real action to convince people that we are committed and want to get things done."

He was speaking to reporters yesterday on the sidelines of the inaugural Leadership Forum organised by the National University of Singapore.

Asked about the plan for the Foreign Ministers to formalise the Charter first, Mr Ong told TODAY: "The point is that the Asean Summit must take the Charter seriously. The leaders have to show that they are fully behind the steady implementation of the Charter. Therefore, an Asean Summit held earlier, rather than later, would give the

impetus to this endeavour."

There is "a more important psychological factor" behind the Charter's formalisation, Mr Ong added — the message that Asean cannot be treated only as something "good to have during fair weather" times.

"Whatever we do, we should not give the impression that when it's not convenient, Asean can be put on the shelf," said Mr Ong. "This is the danger of postponing the Summit."

Besides making a statement on dealing with the financial crisis, Mr Ong said other possible issues on Asean's agenda include tackling threats to security — including environment, food and energy — as well as dealing with the rising costs of living. For example, the Asean collective action on the haze is still unresolved, he noted.

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Mr Ong Keng Yong

"This is the time to do work," stressed Mr Ong. "During the crisis, we reorganise ourselves to be prepared, collectively, as a region."

The Leadership Forum involved the pioneer batch of 38 scholars from the region who are in Singapore on the Temasek Foundation-NUS Leadership Enrichment and Regional Networking award programme.

In the statement yesterday, Dr Surin Pitsuwan — Mr Ong's successor at Asean — described the entry into force of the Charter as "a momentous day" for the region and "a historic milestone for the organisation, repositioning Asean to better meet the challenges of the 21st Century".

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen yesterday also backed Singapore's earlier proposal for crisis-hit Thailand to relinquish hosting the Asean Summit. He said the meeting should not be delayed too long during the current global financial crisis which is affecting all Asean members.

Singapore had suggested that the meeting be held next month, rather than in March, as Thailand had proposed.

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Chicken soup for the family

Soup Restaurant makes it easy for the family to get together for a meal

The only thing better than a hot, delicious meal is sharing it with your loved ones.

As Singaporeans work longer hours, the idea of preparing a traditional family dinner seems exhausting and time-consuming.

Soup Restaurant, with its nutritious home-style Chinese cuisine, has become a convenient and delicious alternative for families — who make up more than 50 per cent of the restaurant's weekend customers.

Mr Chen Renshan, 30, said: "It takes too much time to prepare a meal for the whole family, so we sometimes head for Soup Restaurant where I get to enjoy my favourite Samsui Ginger Chicken while my mum and grandmother — who are very health conscious — would order the soups as they are good comfort food."

Soup Restaurant's marketing manager Irin Lau said: "Gathering the whole family together for a meal is part of the Asian culture. We want to facilitate family bonding by creating a pro-family environment through our food and service."

She explained that a lot of thought had gone into the planning of the menu to ensure that it has something for everyone in the



Soup Restaurant reaches out to families through careful planning of its menu to cater to the young and old, and restaurant layout.

family, from non-spicy and sweet dishes for children to double-boiled herbal soups for senior diners.

To provide more personalised service, wait staff at Soup Restaurant — an accredited Pro-Family Business — are trained to recommend dishes based on customers' profiles and preferences.

In addition, they are trained to serve families as if they were their own. Whenever possible, children are seated away from busy walkways, and staff are trained not to serve hot food near young and elderly customers.

Staff are also well-trained beyond the restaurant confines. They are required to know the location of essential facilities, such as toilets and nursing rooms for mothers, so that they can point guests in the right direction when approached.

Mrs Evelyn Sng, who frequents Soup Restaurant's Tampines outlet with her extended family of 12 including her grandmother and her one-year-old daughter, is impressed with the staff's attentiveness.

Said the 27-year-old: "Each time we visit the restaurant, they would seat us in a private dining area, without us requesting for it. This is good for us as there is more space for the children to move about; and there is even space for me to park the pram without feeling the squeeze."

Mrs P K Tan, a 52-year-old mother of two, added: "Finding restaurants that are affordable for families and serve simple, nutritious home-cooked food is not that easy. It's nice to be able to sit down as an extended family at a place like Soup Restaurant and enjoy a healthy, delicious meal together." MELODY TAN

The Pro-Family Business (PFB) Mark, supported by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, signifies businesses' commitment to welcome families as customers. It underscores the potential business value that can be derived from targeting families as customers. For more information on the PFB Mark, contact the PFB Secretariat at 6375 0939 or visit www.mbp.org.sg.