

Singaporeans upset over PM's 'quitter remark

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SINGAPORE, Fri. — Prime-Minister Goh Chok Tong has provoked a rare public outcry in Singapore by describing people who leave the country when the chips are down as “quitters”.

The tag, used in a National Day speech last weekend, has drawn public condemnation from a people with a reputation for religiously following government utterances.

It was “upsetting”, “too strong”, “unfair labelling”, according to speakers at one of six public feedback forums set up by the government.

The main English daily, *The Straits Times*, received nearly 600 postings and letters to its online and print editions within four days.

Many were from Singaporeans abroad who were upset at being called “quitters”.

The term seemed an anomaly from a country where a large proportion of the country descend from people who quit China in search of a new life.

Singapore also encourages overseas professionals to quit their own country and join Singapore's talent pool, a policy which riles many locals who complain it deprives them of jobs at home and forces them to look elsewhere.

Singaporeans who find the Government “does not listen to feedback, may seek a place where they will be heard — in another country”, Lim Wee Liang wrote in *The Straits Times*.

Goh's speech was designed to be a passionate rallying call for people to rise above the economic gloom and help rebuild a country which went from third world to first in three decades during the latter half of last century.

Young people must show they have the same “never-say-die, can-do spirit” as the nation's founders, and those who do not want to fight for Singapore “I call them quitters”, he said.

“Which other country will they run off to next when bus fares go up in Australia?”

The reference to public transport fares particularly rankled Singaporeans whose protests over recent price hikes during a time of rising unemployment and wage cuts fell on deaf ears.

At one public forum involving mainly university students, speakers questioned how much feedback was taken into account by policy makers.

“So, if the people have strong views, the government should make an effort to take these into consideration instead of just going ahead and implementing what it thinks is best,” an undergraduate was quoted as saying in *The Straits Times*.

Lim Boon Hee wrote: “The Government should also learn to let go and not set rules and restrictions on what we want to do in order to help ourselves survive.” A handful of people did support Goh, including Canadian Margo McCutcheon who said she had been living in the country since 1990.

Raymond Kwok said Singaporeans were becoming ungrateful and unappreciative and needed to see the big picture to “realise that Singapore is worth living and fighting for”. —

AFP