



MESSAGE FROM THE CHIEF JUSTICE

The Judiciary's response to the exit of the "Circuit Breaker" period

29 May 2020

Dear Practitioners and Court Users,

On 19 May 2020, the Ministry of Health issued a press release on the Multi-Ministry Taskforce's decision to exit the "circuit breaker" on 1 June 2020 and embark on a controlled approach to the safe resumption of activities over three phases: first, "Safe Re-opening"; second, "Safe Transition"; and third, "Safe Nation".

As we approach the "Safe Re-opening" phase on 2 June 2020, I wish to express my appreciation for the support and cooperation of the Bar, the Attorney-General's Chambers, Singapore Prisons and all court users during the "circuit breaker" period, particularly in your swift acceptance and adoption of the use of video and teleconferencing for the conduct of hearings. That has been instrumental to our ability to sustain access to justice for essential and urgent matters in the past two months, while ensuring full compliance with the necessary safe distancing requirements.

I now write to update you on the measures that the Judiciary will implement as we exit the "circuit breaker" period.

Resumption of hearings

Hearings for most cases will resume from 8 June 2020. In order to facilitate the disposal of matters that have accumulated during the "circuit breaker", the Supreme Court will not enter its usual recess in June. Likewise, the State Courts and the Family Justice Courts ("FJC") will continue to hear matters in June.

Remote hearings

We have been greatly heartened by the generally positive feedback on the use of video and teleconferencing for the conduct of hearings during the "circuit breaker" period. There was general consensus that remote hearings were convenient, cost and time-efficient, and represented an important means by which the Courts could sustain

access to justice during the pandemic and hopefully enhance this into the future. We will closely monitor the use of remote hearings, gather feedback and suggestions, and continue to refine and improve the process. In light of the need for caution as we progressively lift the “circuit breaker” measures, and given the general success in the conduct of remote hearings thus far, the Courts will continue to use video and teleconferencing for various hearings after 1 June 2020.

At the same time, we are deeply conscious that certain court users – and in particular some litigants-in-person (“LIPs”) – may lack access to, or otherwise experience difficulty participating in, remote hearings. Court users with such difficulties should notify the relevant Court’s Registry ahead of the hearing. LIPs at the FJC who are unable to attend Zoom hearings from their homes may do so at the designated “Zoom Rooms” located on FJC’s premises, which have Zoom connections to the relevant family judge. For more information, please contact the FJC Registry at fjcourts_maintpos@fjcourts.gov.sg (for maintenance and personal protection matters) and fjcourts_family_registry@fjcourts.gov.sg (for all other matters).

Remote interpretation services are also available at each Court to support the conduct of remote hearings.

Physical hearings

Where the Court requires or permits physical attendance at a hearing, safe distancing and other appropriate measures will be in place to minimise the risk of transmission of COVID-19. All practitioners and court users must wear masks at all times while in the court premises, unless otherwise notified by the Court.

To reduce the number of persons in a courtroom and at waiting areas at any one time, hearings will be scheduled with staggered timings. No more than two lawyers/litigants per party may appear at a hearing. If a party requires more than two attendees, that party should make a request for exemption to the Court ahead of the hearing.

Health and safety protocols

As was the practice immediately before the “circuit breaker” period, all visitors to the Courts will be subject to temperature screenings and be required to make health/isolation order declarations before they enter the court premises. Visitors will not be permitted to enter if they are unwell or if they have had contact with any confirmed/suspected cases within the last 14 days. In addition, all visitors must “check in” using the SafeEntry application when entering the court building and “check out” on the same application when exiting. Court users should also download and activate the TraceTogether application. These applications will facilitate contact tracing should the need arise.

We will also continue our regime for the intensive cleaning and disinfection of all courtrooms, chambers, and common areas in the court buildings.

Safe distancing measures such as floor markers in queue lines at service counters, and spaced-out seating arrangements in courtrooms and common areas, will continue to be in place. Our Safety Management Officers will be on the ground to ensure compliance with these measures.

The Supreme Court has set aside an area in level B1 for the use of practitioners who require space to work or rest. Practitioners in the State Courts may use the Bar Room for these purposes. All practitioners and court users must continue to practise safe distancing within the court premises at all times. We will continue to work with the Law Society to identify and address your needs.

In order to limit the number of visitors to the courts buildings, the Supreme Court and State Courts' libraries will remain closed, as will the Learning Court, the Judicial Heritage Gallery at the Supreme Court, and the Heritage Gallery at the State Courts. The café at the Supreme Court will also remain closed. All guided tours will continue to be suspended.

For further information, please access the Courts' websites. Each of the Courts has published a microsite dedicated to announcements and updates on COVID-19. The microsites of the Supreme Court and the FJC also contain a set of FAQs based on queries received. These will be updated regularly. You may also contact the relevant Court Registry officers using the following details:

Supreme Court:

Email: SUPCOURT_Registry@supcourt.gov.sg

Telephone: 6557 7495

Family Justice Courts:

Email: FJCOURTS_Family_Registry@fjcourts.gov.sg

Telephone: 6435 5398

State Courts:

Email: contact@statecourts.gov.sg

Telephone: 6587 8423

Looking ahead

COVID-19 has transformed, perhaps irreversibly, the ways in which we live, work, and interact. In courts around the world, it has accelerated the pace of the technology revolution, particularly in the use of remote communication technology to facilitate the conduct of hearings. Our experience during the pandemic has yielded

many valuable lessons that we must now build on to improve our justice system and further enhance access to justice for all who require it.

As Singapore exits the “circuit breaker” period on 1 June 2020, the legal profession will likely be required to operate within a very different external environment. This may be marked by dampened consumption patterns, rising insolvencies and bankruptcies, realignments of supply chains, heightened concerns about debt and unemployment, and lingering uncertainty about the threat of the virus at least until a vaccine is found. This unfamiliar landscape will challenge conventional business models and methods of working, but it will also present new opportunities, expand several existing fields of work, and inspire innovation both within and beyond the profession.

In the months ahead, all of us in the legal profession must do our part to restore and provide relief to a society in recovery. Our response to this challenge will represent the legacy of our profession in the post-pandemic era.

Thank you for your support throughout this period and stay safe.

Sundaresh Menon
Chief Justice

