

MESSAGE FROM THE CHIEF JUSTICE

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



Dear Practitioners and Court Users,

On 21 April 2020, the Prime Minister and the Multi-Ministry Taskforce announced that the "circuit breaker" measures will be intensified and extended to 1 June 2020 in order to further reduce transmission of COVID-19. As the Prime Minister explained, the extension of the "circuit breaker" may bring about short-term pain and inconvenience but it is necessary that we act decisively in order to break the chain of transmission.

The Judiciary's response to COVID-19 will be consistent with this national policy. We will continue to take all measures to minimise the risk of transmission for judges, court staff, practitioners and court users, while balancing this against the need to maintain access to justice even in these challenging times. I now update you on the Judiciary's response to the recent announcements.

Extension of Relevant Period

The Relevant Period, as defined in the Registrars' Circulars issued by the Supreme Court, State Courts and Family Justice Courts on 5 April 2020, will be extended to **1 June 2020**.

During the extended Relevant Period, the Courts will continue to hear only essential and urgent matters. Hearings for all other matters will be adjourned until the end of the extended Relevant Period. Registrars' Circulars containing further details will be issued by each of the three Courts today and may be found on their respective websites.

Unless there is a further extension of the extended Relevant Period, the Courts will resume hearing most matters a week after the end of the extended Relevant Period (that is, from **8 June 2020**).

Court Vacation

In order to dispose of at least some of the matters that have accumulated during the extended Relevant Period, the Supreme Court will not enter its usual recess in June this year. The State Courts and Family Justice Courts will likewise continue hearing matters in June without their usual break.

Keeping Practitioners and Court Users Updated

To help practitioners and court users navigate the changes to court operations during this period, each of the three Courts has published a microsite dedicated to announcements and updates on COVID-19.¹ The microsites of the Supreme Court and Family Justice Courts contain a set of FAQs on court operations during the Relevant Period.² These FAQs are based on queries received by the Registries of each Court and will be updated regularly. The State Courts' microsite includes an advisory note containing links to the State Courts' e-Services and contact details of the State Courts' helpline.³

Remote Hearings

I mentioned in my message of 27 March 2020 that the Judiciary will be implementing alternatives to physical hearings so as to sustain access to justice while maintaining safe distancing. Over the course of the past few weeks, the Courts have conducted the majority of hearings using remote communication technology such as Zoom. For instance, in the past week alone, the Family Court had fixed for hearing 23 trials of urgent matters concerning maintenance using Zoom, and the Youth Court had fixed for hearing 33 matters in the same way. Similarly, the State Courts conducted remote hearings for 17 pre-trial conferences, 28 plead guilty mentions and 99 other mentions this week. The Supreme Court has, to date, fixed 19 hearings to be conducted by Zoom from the commencement of the Relevant Period up to the end of April 2020, comprising 16 hearings in the High Court and three hearings in the Court of Appeal. The Court of Appeal delivered a judgment yesterday using Zoom, and next week, the Court of Appeal will hear a matter and also deliver another judgment by Zoom without requiring the physical attendance of any judge, lawyer or litigant.

When court hearings and services resume after the extended Relevant Period, practitioners and court users can expect that certain safeguards to prevent transmission may remain in place. In particular, it is likely that some hearings will continue to be heard by way of video or teleconferencing. We will communicate further details in due course.

Cleaning and Disinfection of Court Premises

The Courts have maintained their enhanced cleaning regime for common areas in court buildings such as lobbies, registration counters, restrooms and lifts. Courtrooms and chambers that are in use are cleaned twice a day. The enhanced cleaning regime will continue for some time even after the lifting of the "circuit breaker" measures.

Unity in challenging times

We are immensely grateful for the support and cooperation of the Bar, the Attorney-General's Chambers, Singapore Prisons and all court users in working with us to find ways to

¹ Supreme Court: <supremecourt.gov.sg/quick-links/visitors/covid-19>; State Courts: <statecourts.gov.sg/cws/covid-19/Pages/COVID-19.aspx>; Family Justice Courts: <familyjusticecourts.gov.sg/covid-19>.

² Supreme Court: <[supremecourt.gov.sg/quick-links/visitors/covid-19/frequently-asked-questions-on-supreme-court-operations-during-the-relevant-period-\(7-apr---4-may-2020\)](http://supremecourt.gov.sg/quick-links/visitors/covid-19/frequently-asked-questions-on-supreme-court-operations-during-the-relevant-period-(7-apr---4-may-2020))>; Family Justice Courts: <familyjusticecourts.gov.sg/covid-19/faqs>.

³ State Courts: <statecourts.gov.sg/cws/NewsAndEvents/Pages/COVID-19-ADVISORY-ADJOURNMENT-OF-NON-ESSENTIAL-AND-NON-URGENT-MATTERS.aspx>.

ensure that essential judicial services can be accessed. The legal profession has once again demonstrated its resilience, adaptability and capacity for innovation in this complex and evolving situation. These are challenging times, not just for our profession but also for virtually all sectors and industries in Singapore and indeed across the world. But, it is my hope that we will emerge from this stronger and better prepared than before, if we take this opportunity to focus on our priorities, review our practices to promote efficiency and economy, explore alternative ways to communicate and transact, and acquire the digital skills that have become indispensable.

COVID-19 has reminded us that our health is our most valuable resource. I therefore encourage us all to view our health, and that of our colleagues and neighbours, as our foremost priority both now and in the future.

We welcome your views and suggestions on how we in the Courts can serve our users better in this time. You can email the Chief Executive of the Supreme Court, Ms Juthika Ramanathan, at SUPCOURT_QSM@supcourt.gov.sg if you have any feedback.

Thank you all and stay safe.

Sundaresh Menon
Chief Justice

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