

13TH CHINA-ASEAN PROSECUTORS-GENERAL CONFERENCE

**“STRENGTHENING INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN THE
PREVENTION AND FIGHT AGAINST HIGH-TECH CRIMES,
TRANSNATIONAL CRIMES”**

Hanoi, Vietnam

6th December 2023

Speech by Attorney-General, Mr Lucien Wong, S.C.

Thank you, Your Excellency Mr Le Minh Tri, Prosecutor General of the Supreme People’s Procuracy of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, Your Excellency Mr Ying Yong, Prosecutor General of the Supreme People’s Procuratorate of the People’s Republic of China, my fellow colleagues, Attorneys General, Prosecutors General, ladies and gentlemen. First of all, let me echo the thanks to the Supreme People’s Procuracy of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam for hosting this wonderful conference and welcoming us so warmly to Ha Noi.

2. I am indeed privileged to be speaking at this esteemed gathering of Prosecutors-General. It has been some time since we last met in Siem Reap before Covid, and I was personally looking forward to this meeting hosted by Your Excellency. Singapore is committed to cooperating with our international counterparts to tackle the twin scourges of transnational and technology crimes.

3. Singapore is a small, globally-connected country, with one of the most open economies in the world. We are one of the largest financial centres in the world, and at

96.9%.¹, we have one of the highest internet penetration rates in ASEAN. While this provides us tremendous opportunities for economic growth, it leaves us vulnerable to risks, such as transnational criminal syndicates seeking to exploit Singapore's position as a key trade and financial node, and its digitized economy, to channel ill-gotten goods, services and funds through our country. Syndicates also target our citizens, especially the vulnerable elderly, as victims of online scams.

4. The increase in scams perpetuated by transnational syndicates illustrates these risks. Over the last 5 years, Singapore has seen an exponential increase in the number of scam reports. In 2017, there were 5000 reports of individuals targeted by scams.² In 2022, there were more than 30,000 reports of scams, which is a six - fold increase. We have also seen a corresponding increase in the amount of money lost to scams over the last 5 years, from S\$125 million in 2017 to more than S\$600 million in 2022.³

5. Scam operations are well-resourced, complex and involve multiple jurisdictions. Transnational syndicates are also now becoming increasingly tech-savvy in the way they conduct their operations by using communication platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram, and financial platforms, such as digital banking services, to commit fraud on unsuspecting and often vulnerable individuals.

¹ "Digital 2023 Singapore", by We Are Social & Meltwater (2023), retrieved from <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-singapore>.

² Please refer to the Annex for a graphical description of the statistics.

³ Annual Scams and Cybercrime Brief 2022, Singapore Police Force.

6. Additionally, these syndicates are starting to employ the latest artificial intelligence technologies to commit scams and to evade detection. We have seen examples in other jurisdictions of scammers using sophisticated algorithms to mimic the voices of family members of victims to deceive them into believing that their loved ones are in need of money. It is only a matter of time before such cases reach our shores, and we all need to be prepared for such developments.⁴

7. Transnational syndicates act across national borders. They do not respect sovereignty and disregard the laws of all our countries. Therefore, the challenges of bringing down these syndicates are common to ASEAN and China. ASEAN and China have fast-growing digital economies which become more globally-linked each day. We are all similarly vulnerable to transnational syndicates exploiting our tech savvy populations to commit crimes.

8. International cooperation is therefore crucial in tackling these challenges. Singapore is committed to cooperating with our international counterparts to tackle transnational and technology crimes. This includes providing expeditious assistance to requests from our international counterparts, collaborating with them to disrupt syndicates, or evidence sharing with other countries on an informal basis.

9. I would like to share with you two key aspects which underscore our commitment to international cooperation, which are *first*, the development of legislative

⁴ “Scammers use deepfakes to create voice recordings and videos to trick victims’ family, friends”
Nadine Chua, The Straits Times, 15 June 2023

frameworks that are consistent with our international obligations and, *second*, the establishment of channels of cooperation with our international counterparts.

10. Let me first touch on the development of legislative frameworks. International cooperation is of course subject to the parameters of each country's domestic framework, and there are several ways in which we provide assistance to our international counterparts. For example, our law enforcement agencies regularly share information through various networks, such as the Egmont Group, which is an organisation that facilitates the exchange of information among law enforcement agencies to combat money laundering and terrorism financing. Nonetheless, without a domestic legislative framework that enshrines and underpins key principles of international cooperation, it would be unclear to our international counterparts what processes are in place for them to obtain assistance from us, and whether it is in fact possible for us to render assistance to them.

11. Our primary legislation which enables Singapore to provide effective and expeditious mutual legal assistance to our international counterparts is the Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters Act ("**MACMA**"). The MACMA came into force in 2000 and signalled our commitment to deal emphatically with transnational crime.

12. Over the last 20 years, the MACMA has been periodically reviewed and amended to enable Singapore to be a stronger partner to tackle cross-border crime. For example, in 2006, the MACMA was amended to remove the requirement for a Mutual

Legal Assistance treaty between Singapore and another country before Singapore was able to render assistance. Today, even if there is no Mutual Legal Assistance treaty, under the MACMA, Singapore can render mutual legal assistance. Additionally, in 2014, the MACMA was amended to remove the dual criminality requirement to be satisfied for certain types of assistance, such as serving foreign court documents on persons located in Singapore.

13. We also constantly review the schedule of serious offences specified in the MACMA, to ensure that the offences for which the Singapore authorities may render assistance is up to date with current trends.

14. Cumulatively, these reviews to the MACMA have strengthened our capability to facilitate requests for mutual legal assistance from our international counterparts by simplifying the processes to obtain assistance from Singapore, and to render timely and effective assistance to our international counterparts.

15. All requests for mutual legal assistance by foreign States are dealt with by our Chambers as the Central Authority and are overseen by the International Cooperation Team (“**ILCT**”) from our International Affairs Division, in consultation with the relevant Government Ministries and agencies. The ILCT is led by two senior officers, who were previously Deputy Public Prosecutors and therefore have deep experience in dealing with criminal matters.

16. Despite the increasing number and complexity of requests we are receiving, we have continued to render timely assistance. We obtain court orders to compel entities to produce or surrender evidence in their possession, which is crucial in the information gathering process because it preserves critical evidence during police investigations. Our officers also expeditiously obtain court orders to restrain proceeds of crime, which enable them to preserve assets for future confiscation or restitution and prevent the disposal of these assets. Your Excellency, you had mentioned at the meeting MLA requests where Singapore rendered assistance expeditiously to return funds.

17. In addition to providing assistance to our international counterparts, we have recently passed legislation which enables us to proactively tackle the threat posed by transnational syndicates to Singapore. The Online Criminal Harms Act (“OCHA”), which was only passed in Parliament in July this year, is a proactive response to deal with transnational syndicates which utilise internet platforms as a medium to commit offences, such as the perpetration of scams.

18. The OCHA enables our law enforcement agencies to issue directions to various parties – like internet service providers, social media companies and even app stores – to remove or block access to content that is suspected to be used to commit crimes. This empowers us to act swiftly against syndicates and decisively, wherever they may be, to undermine their ability to reach scam victims at an early stage. So if we

suspect there is an app that helps syndicates in committing scams, this Act will help us to block the app. Time will tell how effective the OCHA will be and whether other jurisdictions will adopt such legislation. Nonetheless, if necessary, we will not hesitate to refine and improve the OCHA.

19. I now move to my second point, which is the establishment of cooperation channels between Singapore and our international counterparts. Such cooperation channels strengthen relationships between Singapore and our international counterparts and encourage the exchange of ideas and information on how to address transnational and technological criminal issues which are relevant to a particular jurisdiction.

20. One example of a cooperation channel between Singapore and our regional counterparts is the ASEAN Cybercrime Prosecutors Roundtable Meeting (“**ACPRM**”), which our Chambers organises on a yearly basis in tandem with the Singapore International Cyber Week. The ACPRM is a closed-door meeting comprising prosecutors from around the ASEAN region which focuses on discussing pertinent technology crime issues and the exchange of best practices. The 6th ACPRM was held recently in October 2023 about 6 weeks ago, and many of you nominated delegates to participate at the meeting. I thank you for supporting our initiative and look forward to further strengthening the relationship between our respective prosecution agencies.

21. Apart from the exchange of experiences and practices between our officers, Singapore also maintains cooperation channels between our law enforcement agencies. The Anti-Scam Command of the Singapore Police Force, formed in 2022, takes the lead

in our fight against online scams, and regularly engages with international agencies to combat technology-enabled scams. As an example, the Anti Scam-Command recently cooperated with overseas law enforcement agencies, including the Royal Malaysia Police, and dismantled 13 scam syndicates. More than 70 persons, based outside Singapore and responsible for more than 280 scam cases, were arrested.

22. Apart from taking down scam syndicates, Singapore's Anti-Scam Centre, which is one of the arms of the Anti-Scam Command, also works closely with the Hong Kong Police Force to seize and recover money for scam victims in *both* jurisdictions. Between 2021 and 2022, the two agencies successfully intercepted criminal proceeds of nearly S\$16 million and prevented the dissipation of funds to criminal syndicates tied to about 300 financial crime cases.

23. We are heartened to share in the successes of these joint investigative efforts, and trust that this will pave the way for more opportunities to pool our strengths across boundaries.

24. I would like to conclude by reiterating that while the challenges we face because of transnational and technology crime are difficult and complex, we can surmount these challenges by standing and working together. As I have highlighted, Singapore has had some success in disrupting criminal operations in the region while collaborating with our international counterparts. It is therefore clear that while transnational syndicates may evolve in tandem with technological advances, we can respond robustly with unity, cooperation, and collaboration.

25. Thank you very much.

ANNEX

Overview of scam statistics in Singapore



Source: Singapore Police Force