

**Presentation by Secretary for Judiciary Administrator
at the Special Meeting of the Finance Committee
on Thursday, 22 March 2001**

Mr Chairman,

In the past year, the Judiciary successfully implemented the new financial jurisdictional limits on the District Court and took measures to contain court waiting time. In the year ahead, we will monitor the operation of the District Court. We will also introduce new information technology applications with a view to further enhancing our services to judges, court users and the public.

District Court

2. The District Court (Amendment) Ordinance which came into operation in September last year provided for an increase in the civil jurisdiction of the District Court from \$120,000 to \$600,000. In the first five months, the volume of civil cases in the District Court has almost doubled : 6 299 civil actions were filed during the period, as compared to 3 076 for the same period in 1999.

3. Whilst it is still too early to give an accurate assessment of the impact brought about by the increase in the number of cases that will proceed to trial, plans are nevertheless in hand to increase the number of civil courts from five to six. We will monitor the situation carefully and review the operation of the District Court in two years' time to see whether the financial jurisdiction limit could be further increased.

Court Waiting Times

4. We are always mindful that access to justice should be achieved at reasonable speed. We are therefore making every effort to keep court waiting time within reasonable limits.

5. We have taken special measures to reduce the backlog of magistracy appeals. We have successfully run down the backlog to about 110 cases pending trial at the end of February 2001, compared to 210 cases six months ago.

6. The caseload of the Labour Tribunal in 2000 dropped to 9 611 cases from the record high of 11 594 cases in 1999. We have taken this opportunity to reduce the backlog of cases and to consolidate the improvements made to the waiting time. Two additional day courts were set up in January 2000, making a total of 12 day courts, on top of three night courts already set up in April 1999. Furthermore, another measure was introduced in September 2000 to convert two call-over courts, at which the Presiding Officers examine the readiness of the cases to proceed to trial, into trial courts, thereby helping to reduce the backlog of cases and the waiting time for trial. The backlog has been reduced to about 480 cases compared with about 650

cases a year ago.

7. Pressure from civil and criminal cases in the Court of First Instance is still an area of concern. The number of civil cases, which rose drastically to 35 000 in 1999, fell to 29 000 in 2000 and is expected to drop further in 2001 owing to the increase in the civil jurisdiction of the District Court. However, this would not give us any immediate relief as many of the cases filed in 1999 and 2000 have now reached the stage of trial. The number of criminal cases has increased by 21% in 2000, when compared with 1999, and is expected to increase this year. The Judiciary would redeploy resources to identified pressure areas.

Application of information technology

8. As part of the Judiciary Information Systems Strategy, all courts and tribunals now have a case management system for the storage and retrieval of case related information. The remaining Phase III projects (including the Automated Leadership Resource Tool, Pilot Electronic Filing of Tax Claims, the Public Information and Payment Systems) will be implemented this year.

9. We are going to build the first Technology Court at the High Court Building for the conduct of trials and hearings. Facilities will include multi-media presentation of evidence and case related material in electronic form and video conferencing.

10. A feasibility study on the readiness and opportunities for the adoption of electronic filing and document handling in courts will also be conducted.

Conclusion

11. The proposals I outlined above are part of our efforts to maintain an independent and competent judicial system, capable of upholding the rule of law and safeguarding the rights and freedom of the individual. With Members' support, we have no doubt that we will be able to meet the challenges ahead.

12. Thank you.