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## DISABLED COMMUTERS

# A plea for concessions

Over 370 sign petition to PTC, MOT and transport operators

NEO CHAI CHIN

[chaichin@mediacorp.com.sg](mailto:chaichin@mediacorp.com.sg)

SINGAPORE — As a blind masseur, Mr Rahamatulla travels to clients' homes across the island for work. The 23-year-old earns less than \$500 a month, with half of his income going to public transport costs.

Like him, visually impaired hotel telemarketer Reena Rajesvari, 51, spends a quarter of her \$800 monthly income on public transport — with the remainder going to support her mother and sister.

As the world today marks the United Nations' International Day of Persons with Disabilities, Mr Rahamatulla and Ms Reena are hoping for a helping hand from public transport operators in the form of concessionary fares.

They would like fares for disabled persons to be pegged to fares for senior citizens — \$0.69 on air-con buses and \$0.68 to \$1.09 on trains using concession cards — but without the hours of restriction.

"Jobs are very limited for the disabled," said Ms Reena, who was a primary school teacher before losing her sight to glaucoma at the age of 30.

Concessions are given to students, National Servicemen and the elderly, and "I hope that we also will be considered along the same lines", she said. Disabled in-

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dividuals make up 4 per cent of Singapore's population.

Ms Reena has approached her Member of Parliament as well as the public transport operators over the past decade for help, without success.

She has now rallied 377 people through the informal group Challenged's Alliance Network (CAN!) to sign a petition, addressed to the

Public Transport Council. Copies will be sent to Transport Minister Raymond Lim, SMRT and SBS Transit.

When approached, the PTC said it did not administer "any form of public transport subsidy".

A spokesman said the Public Transport Fund was administered by the Transport Ministry and disbursed through grassroots channels to needy families.

SMRT and SBS Transit said they were exploring the possibility of extending concessions to the disabled. "However, any concessionary or free travel is effectively cross-subsidised by full-fare paying commuters. Thus, there is a need to exercise prudence in granting travel concessions," said an SMRT spokesperson.

But able-bodied commuters such as Ms Charlene Tan, 20, are keen to contribute.

The undergraduate believes there is a lack of awareness among the general public that the disabled have to pay full fares. Until she joined a volunteer group earlier this year, she had thought they were subsidised.

Four in 10 of the petition's signatories are able-bodied, and 89 per cent agreed that full-fare paying commuters should cross-subsidise the disabled, said Mr Ravi Philemon, CAN!'s media spokesperson.

According to Ms Reena, another reason cited by PTOs previously was the difficulty in administering a concession card for the disabled.

But she believes that by tapping the National Council of Social Service's Developmental Disability Registry — which has 7,000 people with disabilities and dementia registered — such hurdles can be overcome. **ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY HETTY MUSFIRAH**



## Orchard Road's newest mall 313@Somerset opens today

SINGAPORE — With weeks to go before Christmas, 313@Somerset today becomes the final mall this year to open along Orchard Road.

All units on all eight levels of retail space were leased out four months prior to opening, an unprecedented feat in this challenging economic climate, according to the mall.

It will open in stages from today, with 177 specialty retailers and concierge ambassadors to help with most things from

taxi bookings to hotel delivery services and language interpretation.

Among the global brand-name tenants are Forever 21, Uniqlo, Zara, HMV, Stadium, Marche and three "food precincts": A food hall opening in January, street-level restaurants and cafes, and a Food Republic on the fifth level featuring a unique sky garden.

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Members of the Challenged's Alliance Network with copies of their petition for concessionary travel on public transport. NEO CHAI CHIN

## Jailed for not paying workers

SINGAPORE — A man was jailed yesterday for nine months for not paying the wages of his workers.

Julian Yip Si Wei, 27, who was the sole proprietor of Zippon Marine and Engineering and M Power Engineering, had pleaded guilty to 50 charges of failing to pay salaries of \$768 each to 50 foreign employees working as labourers for either firm.

He had run out of work for his workers at the end of last year. But instead of cancelling

their work permits and repatriating them, Yip kept them here.

Twice, in January and in February, he did not meet one of their work permit conditions — that they should be paid no later than one week after their respective salary periods.

Fifty other similar charges were taken into consideration when Yip was sentenced. He could have been fined up to \$5,000 or jailed for up to six months on each charge, or both.