

Answering the call of nature, profitably

Local firm to sell cheap, portable fertiliser toilets to developing nations

SINGAPORE — Christopher Ng has a dream: To help alleviate a major global health problem by bringing toilets to the world's poor — at a tidy profit.

Mr Ng, managing director at Singapore-based Rigel Technology, hopes to sell his state-of-the-art, portable, fertiliser-

making toilets for as low as US\$30 (\$41.40) beginning next year, tapping into a multi-billion-dollar market for proper sanitation in developing countries.

It is among the exhibits at the annual World Toilet Summit in Singapore, which brings together industry players to generate awareness of the world's sanitation problems. Experts estimate about 2.5 billion people lack functioning, hygienic toilets and instead excrete in the open, a habit that can contaminate water supplies and spread diseases such

as E coli bacteria and other viruses.

Mr Ng said Rigel's toilets separate liquid from solid waste, a feature that should reduce odour and create fertiliser. Pulling out a compartment at the bottom of a prototype, he said: "A farmer could sell this recycled fertiliser ... It's good to sell something that's useful and make a minimum profit."

Mr Jack Sim, who founded in 2001 the non-profit World Toilet Organisation — one of the organisers of the three-day conference — estimated the market for sanitation in developing countries is worth \$1 trillion.

Health advocates have sought to entice companies like Rigel to invest in affordable, portable toilets after efforts by international aid organisations and donations by rich countries fell short, he said.

Donated portable toilets sometimes ended up in storage, as the units were poorly distributed and villagers were not taught how to use and maintain them, said Mr Sim.

"We've seen that the donor model doesn't work. Now, people are taking the marketplace as the solution, because it works fastest when you have a profit motive. Selling to the poor need not be exploitative," he added.

Mr Sim said the World Toilet Organisation will help advertise Rigel's toilets through its contacts with non-government organisations and humanitarian groups.

Director of the Institute of Water Policy K E Seetharam, at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, estimated just 22 per cent of India's rural population and 29 per cent of China's have access to working toilets.

"People aren't aware of the cost of open defecation in terms of lost work and school



Rigel's prototype toilet, with compost chamber below. AFP

days from disease," he said, adding that many children in poor areas are malnourished "not because of a lack of food but because of worms in their intestines that they got from unsanitary conditions".

Rigel's Mr Ng, who estimates poor countries need 500 million toilets, said he expects to sell 10,000 units per month beginning in February in countries such as China, India and Sri Lanka. "The market for this is very big," he said. "I hope other companies will follow our lead." AP