

# He wants to raise social status of loos

Founder of toilet body starts online drive to tout health benefits of a proper commode

■ By **KIMBERLY SPYKERMAN**

MR JACK Sim has a dream: One day, he hopes toilets will have the same social cachet in developing countries as mobile phones.

To reach that goal, the founder of the World Toilet Organisation, which operates in 51 countries, has launched a new online campaign touting the health benefits of a proper commode.

"A toilet cannot be just a shabby, dirty hole in the ground. It must be clean, well-ventilated and possibly tiled," said the 51-year-old Mr Sim, who founded the toilet association in 2001.

While up to two million people die every year from diseases related to poor sanitation, needy villagers across Asia would rather splash out on a mobile phone than a toilet, he said.

It is a matter of keeping up with the Joneses. "If a family has a nice mobile phone or a TV set, then other families will want one too. But nobody thinks of toilets in that way," he said.

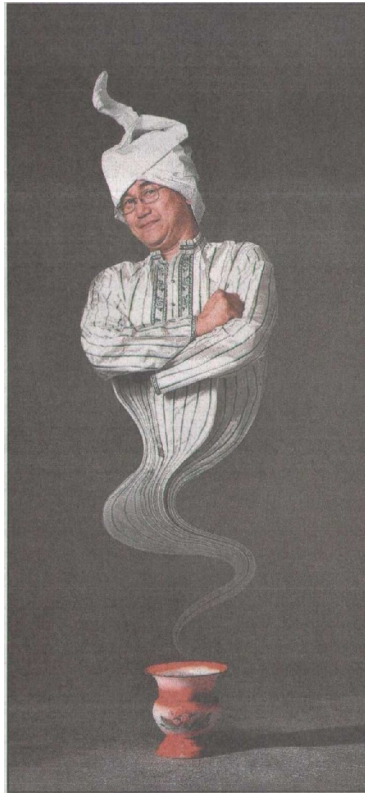
So Mr Sim launched a month-long online drive last week, largely through e-mail and social networking sites, to project toilets as a status symbol.

The aptly titled "Don't Blush, Just Flush!" campaign also aims to educate people in rich countries about sanitation problems faced by villagers in South-east Asia and South Asia.

Visitors to the World Toilet Organisation website can "sponsor a flush" for as little as US\$1 (\$S1.45). Mr Sim hopes the campaign will raise at least US\$100,000.

The money will go towards building ecologically sound toilets in rural areas, he said. At about US\$140 each, they convert human waste into fertiliser.

For championing the rights of those



**Toilets should be clean and well-ventilated, says Mr Sim, seen in this publicity photo he provided. To get people talking about toilets, the founder of the World Toilet Organisation is organising an exhibition of toilet seat covers. PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: JIM ORCA FOR THE STRAITS TIMES**

with little or no access to proper sanitation, Mr Sim was honoured in a recent issue of Time magazine as a "hero of the environment".

Once involved in real estate, construction and education, Mr Sim now does volunteer work full time – something that became possible when some property investments paid off.

In 2001, he founded the World Toilet

Organisation – an umbrella organisation with 137 member groups spread across 51 countries. To date, the organisation has raised more than US\$1 million for toilet building efforts.

Mr Sim said a lack of hygienic commodes is not only an issue in developing countries.

Singapore, he added, has to contend with the problem of being a First World nation with less-than-stellar toilet etiquette.

And he is determined to flush out the problem.

Today, he will for the first time meet officials from the National Environment Agency, the Ministry of Manpower and National Parks Board. The discussion is aimed at improving the state of toilets here, which he described as inconsistent.

"We've cleaned up the Singapore River and we've cleaned up our streets. Why not our toilets?" he asked.

He believes government bodies must work together to ensure that good toilet etiquette is practised.

That includes ensuring toilets are well-built and creating public education campaigns, which would make users more likely to keep them clean.

It is a principle that holds true in Third World countries as well, Mr Sim said. Without proper education, the new toilets might well end up as storehouses for firewood, he said.

With 2.6 billion people lacking access to proper toilets, the United Nations has designated 2008 as the International Year of Sanitation.

Mr Sim's believes that resolving the global sanitation crisis requires a multi-pronged approach involving both developing and developed nations.

Come next month, he will enlist the help of design students as well as local artists to design toilet seat covers. He plans to stage an exhibition here before taking it global.

The goal? To get people talking about toilets. "When it comes to toilets, if it's not good enough, it's not good enough. Let's not pretend."

[kimspsyke@sph.com.sg](mailto:kimspsyke@sph.com.sg)