

600 million lack toilets in modern India

MUMBAI — In Mumbai's slum areas, about 81 people share a single toilet. In some places it rises to an eye-watering 273. Even the lowest average is still 58, according to local municipal authority figures.

Unsurprisingly, it is still common to see people squatting by roads and railway tracks or along the coast, openly defecating in the city that drives India's economy and where some of the world's richest people live.

The UN estimates that 600 million people or 55 per cent of Indians still defecate outside, more than 60 years after the independence leader Mahatma Gandhi first talked

of the responsible disposal of human waste.

Mr Jack Sim, the founder and president of the World Toilet Organization (WTO), has made it his mission to improve sanitation across the globe. For him, India has "a lot of work to do" to improve sanitation, not just because of its impact on health and the spread of diseases like diarrhoea, which Unicef says kills 1,000 Indian children aged under five every day.

It also tarnishes the image of a country that likes to portray itself as an emerging world economic superpower, the Singapore businessman said on a visit to Mumbai, where he was promot-



Men at crowded public urinals in Mumbai. AFP

ing World Toilet Day on Nov 19.

Poor sanitation and the illnesses it causes cost the Indian economy US\$255 million (\$354 million) a year, according to the health ministry. Mr Sim, who sees links between public lavatories and social development, wants the issue pushed up the political agenda. "People go to the toilet more often than they have sex," he said. "Everybody has to go."

"Every problem is a business," said Mr Sim, adding there would be a benefit for the entire city and the country's economy if every slum-dweller had access to proper sanitation.

"People who are healthy are able to produce more, they get out of poverty, they get into the middle class, they move up and consume more," he said. "Business is, I think, the fastest and the cheapest way. The private sector will come up with innovations. Let them compete to serve the poor." AFP