Regional law body gets going

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FOUR years since the idea of a pan-Asian law body was first mooted, 150 judges, academics and lawyers came together yesterday for the three-day inaugural conference of the Asian Society of International Law.

Held at the National University of Singapore's law faculty, the conference featured participants like Dame Rosalyn Higgins, president of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague. The other participants came from at least 12 countries around the region.

The new society's first act was to appoint a president, ICJ judge Hisashi Owada, 74. He said getting the society going was a smooth process, but its biggest challenge now is "to create a society that is sustainable and which is going to grow''.

The society will elect its 20 executive council members tomorrow, two of which will be Singaporeans.

They are likely to be Professor Tommy Koh, chairman of the Institute of Policy Studies and ambassador-at-large, and Professor Tan Cheng Han, dean of the NUS law faculty.

With Asia's growing importance in international affairs, there is a need for a forum where the region's scholars and lawyers can exchange views and debate issues.

"We can't allow other international law scholars around the world to do the running on international law. We need our own perspective to be brought to the table as well," said Prof Tan, 42.

Singapore has been chosen as the society's headquarters because of its strategic location and position as a centre of communications, said Judge Owada.

The NUS law faculty also offered to be the society's secretariat.

Membership of the society is open to any institution or individual with an interest in international law.

At the conference's opening dinner last night, Foreign Minister George Yeo said Asean countries are now placing more value on international law.

The Asean leaders' decision to adopt a charter during their next summit in November, providing for compulsory dispute settlement by independent panels, was evidence of that, he said.

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