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Langkawi-Expensive (News Analysis)  
PM'S WARNING AWAKENS TRADERS

By: Zuhrin Azam Ahmad

LANGKAWI, June 4 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's disappointment at the attitude of a handful of traders on this duty-free resort island two-days ago was not his first outburst.

He will frown every time his attention is drawn to the complaints raised by visitors who are unhappy over the attitude of the traders concerned who increase their prices and service charges arbitrarily.

In his latest outburst, he said: "I don't know what else is there to do as even the threat of withdrawing the duty-free status seems to have no effect."

Dr Mahathir has every reason to be upset at the attitude of the traders who were only interested in quick profit because he had personally taken much effort to plan and monitor the development of the island which had become the best promotion to "market" Langkawi to tourists.

"Everyone is greedy, we prevent them (from increasing prices) for their own good, if prices are high people will not come, and if they don't come later, we are the ones to suffer."

This is his most severe warning to the Langkawi traders whom Dr Mahathir describes as ungrateful, adding that the wealth that they now enjoy can disappear due to their own greed.

However, the traders explain that the public must realise the situation is caused by several factors with transport cost being the main factor which is beyond their control.

One operator of an eatery at the Pandak Mayah holiday resort claims that he himself wants to keep his prices very low but it is not possible.

"The prices of all the ingredients used like vegetables, fish, meat and chicken are already high compared to their cost on the mainland because of the transportation cost," says the source who declined to be named.

This situation cannot be avoided because all the raw materials used in Langkawi are brought in from the mainland using cargo vessels, the source adds.

The impression that prices in Langkawi are expensive may also be due to the higher rates charged for self-drive hire cars during every holiday season.

This fact is acknowledged by one self-drive hire car operator at the Kuah Jetty who holds to the principle of supply and demand.

There is very high demand for hire cars during the holiday season while the number of cars available is inadequate, the source says.

According to him, on normal days he can charge an average of RM60 per car per day but when the demand increases, there appears to be some form of agreement among operators to increase their charges for car hire to an average of RM100 per car.

"When there are visitors willing to pay at that price, other operators will also raise their price because there are no businessmen who do not want to make profits," he says.

Asked whether this practice can affect Langkawi's image as a holiday destination and tourist attraction, he says it is not as bad as it is made out to be.

"What we offer here are much cheaper compared to the mainland. Just imagine, can we rent a car for an average of RM100 per day on the mainland?"

"The cheapest is RM150 and if they come during the off-peak season, they can hire the car at RM60 per day," he adds.

On Dr Mahathir's warning that the duty-free status for Langkawi may be withdrawn as a lesson to them, he agrees that if the status is really withdrawn it will affect their livelihood with the hotel sector being worst affected.

But they say the current situation is caused by the chain effect which they relate to the increased ferry fare and the rumour that cargo cost is going up. Since last Saturday, the ferry fare between Kuala Kedah and here was raised to RM15 from RM13 previously while the fare from Kuala Perlis was raised by RM2 to RM12.

In his criticism, Dr Mahathir was very frank and his latest criticism at the Langkawi traders clearly shocked them.

"They (traders) did not come out with a single sen to develop this island, now they have become rich but they are ungrateful," he said.

The traders here must take the cue from the Prime Minister's warning if they do not want to "kill the goose that lays the golden egg." -- BERNAMA

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