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A sen saved is a sen gained

WITH everybody doing something to help prevent the cost of living from skyrocketing and aggravating the economic situation, it would have been a terrible blow for Malaysians if toll rates had been increased. The Government deserves some praise for the sensible decision to bar a raise in toll rates next year. About a million vehicles enter Kuala Lumpur daily, and most of these pass the tolls on routes between Port Klang and the city, or the airport and the hotels. An increase in toll rates would have caused a chain-reaction and been used as an excuse to raise transport fares and charges.

The concessionaires affected by the Cabinet decision - Projek Lebuh raya Utara Selatan (PLUS) for the 848km North-South Expressway and Expressway Linkaran Tengah Sdn Bhd (ELITE) for the 48km Shah-Alam Nilai stretch - will no doubt find themselves on the receiving end of the stick. The concessions they signed with the Government allow them a periodical increase in toll rates and these companies depend heavily on the toll collection to service their loans. Toll rates have been increased so many times during the last 10 years, that the price of the petrol needed to drive down to Johor Baru in a Kancil is probably less than the toll charges one has to pay for using the expressway. Still, the cost of building these highways was high. The concessionaires also have to maintain them round the clock and provide other services to users, all of which costs money.

However, these are difficult times, not just for highway concessionaires or expressway users but for Malaysians from all walks of life. Since the July devaluation of the baht, wages for many have been sliced or frozen and some people have lost jobs as companies downsized or shut down. People and companies have lost billions on the stock market and thousands were affected by the depreciation of the ringgit. Inflation is seeping in and the inevitable price increases for some basic imported items have been announced. Growth forecasts have been revised downwards and government expenditure has been cut by one-fifth. Projects have been deferred and thousands of students who had dreamt of an education overseas have had to give it a miss for now.

Little sacrifices are made everyday by the little people of this country. The Government has shown that it understands and appreciates this. It has announced that petroleum prices will not go up as feared and has warned traders not to increase prices at will. The Government is even considering adding to the list of essential items whose prices will be controlled. It is clear that the Government does not wish to overly-burden the low-income earners and does not want people to lose their livelihood, no matter how bad the situation becomes. Besides, the situation is not as bad as that faced by some neighbouring countries. Credit growth has been too rapid and the current account deficit has been a subject of concern, but there are ways to address these problems without unduly affecting the average Malaysian. There is a lack of confidence in prospects but the Government has been trying hard to boost sentiments.

A little bit of help from the business community will certainly go a long way right now. Certainly PLUS and ELITE, the two expressway concessionaires involved in the Government decision not to raise toll rates, are helping. Many others have, but more should come forward to help with the confidence-building. The least they can do, as has been requested

by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, is to refrain from any action that might aggravate the situation. This appeal applies to every single Malaysian. We must recall, that in the case of a toll rates increase, Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu had made it seem that the increase was unavoidable and that any amendment to the concession agreement with PLUS would be akin to "disturbing a hornet's nest". Such statements certainly will not mesh well with efforts to rebuild confidence. If Malaysians are willing to do their very best to restore the economy and secure the future of this nation, there must also be a desire to use all means necessary to make the best of this toughest of situations.

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