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Alien workforce a burden too heavy

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WEDNESDAY'S announcement of the freeze on the admission of foreign workers into the country with immediate effect might not have come as a complete surprise to those who have been following official statements on matters pertaining to the country's over-dependence on foreign workforce.

This has been a constant talking point of the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, during his two-month leave in June and July, and since returning to work.

The term "returning to work" is misleading because the Prime Minister worked as hard when he was on vacation; making working visits to several countries.

Dr Mahathir has repeatedly warned of the dangers of over-dependence on foreign workers, citing the fact that Malaysia, despite being smaller in terms of size of its population and economy to Japan, employs many more foreign workers.

Announcing the decision in Kuala Lumpur, Deputy Home Minister Datuk Tajol Rosli Ghazali said the Government deemed the figure "too high" and would keep the ruling in force until it is brought under control. He said another reason is to compel employers to give preference to local workers.

While there are an estimated 1.7 million foreign workers in Malaysia, there are only 300,000 in Japan.

This easily makes Malaysia among the countries most heavily dependent on foreign workers both in terms of ratio to population as well as to the size of the economy.

In the case of the second, it clearly shows wastage and under-utilisation of human resources. The productivity is too low to justify the economics and social costs of hosting so many foreign workers.

Dr Mahathir thinks the answer to the problem lies in changing the way we do things by adopting labour-saving methods like mechanisation and automation, changing the construction methods and enhancing the overall productivity of the workforce.

As early as the beginning of the last decade we could have seen the haphazardness of the importation of foreign workers which started with the plantation and later the construction sectors.

In the absence of a coherent policy and enforcement, loopholes were created that allowed waves after waves of illegal immigrants to enter the country with impunity.