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Deadlines are not meant to be extended

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DEPUTY Home Minister Ong Ka Ting was cutting a cake to usher in the New Year with officers of the Immigration Department. There was not much of a party mood as everybody was on duty, no thanks to the last-minute rush to legalise illegal foreign workers. In Ong's own words, "It was a small boost to morale".

Not much of it was left though, Ong complained, when the department was blamed later by some of the applicants for "not opening more counters to accommodate the rush".

The Immigration Department was one of several departments which found themselves at the wrong end of the news last week.

On the eve of the New Year, the National Registration Department and the Road Transport Department were swarmed by thousands of last-minute applicants for identity cards and new driving licences. There were similar complaints there - that more counters should have been opened to accommodate these applicants.

Last-minute rush seems to be an in-thing with Malaysians. Although the authorities had given the people some six years to renew their ICs and a year to renew their driving licences, thousands did not do so until the deadline was very near.

Employers hiring illegal foreigners were also given months to apply for the necessary papers to "legalise" their workers. Most did it on the very last day, forcing the Immigration Department to open until the wee hours of New Year's day in Kuala Lumpur and Johor Baru.

Hundreds of last-minute applicants for driving licences in Kuala Lumpur started lining up at the counters as early as 3am to ensure they get to the counters.

Yet, worse than these last-minute believers are thousands of Malaysians who did not even bother to queue up for their ICs, driving licences, or working permits. For example, there were 400,000 people who did not apply for the new ICs. It can be assumed that many of them were confident that the lenient authorities were going to stay lenient and extend the period for them to renew their papers.

"We can (extend the deadline)," Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was quoted as saying when asked by reporters about an extension of the deadline for new ICs. "But then there will still be those who will fail to do so."

In this context, the deportation of 1,126 Indonesians back to where they came from last Friday provided a most interesting insight. Not only was this kind of deportation unprecedented, it also signalled the seriousness of the Government to curb the growing problem and to give no more extension to those who have failed to get permits for their illegal workers.

There are, according to official estimates, some 2.1 million foreign workers in this country, both legal and illegal.

As a result of the regularisation exercise that ended on December 31 1996, some 700,000 foreigners are now considered "legal", including some 400,000 who were registered during the first round of the regularisation exercise in 1992. This number is only in Peninsular Malaysia as the exercise has yet to be implemented in Sabah and Sarawak. There are an estimated one million foreigners in Sabah alone.

The Home Ministry is "talking" to various governments to take back their

citizens in Malaysia who have not got the relevant employment papers. This will ensure that Malaysia does not have to bear the transportation costs to send them back. Already, the Government is having to cough up a huge amount of money to feed those detained at the "depots" for such illegal foreigners.

Between July 1992 and July 1995, the Government spent some RM39.2 million for the upkeep of the centres excluding the salaries of personnel manning the depots.

Once all the illegals have been sent home, this country will be left only with foreigners who are here for temporary work. The authorities are hoping that this will ultimately help eliminate, or at least reduce significantly, the socio-economic havoc the illegal foreigners have been causing.

The Government has also passed new laws to belt out harsher penalties - including whipping and jail terms - against offenders who facilitate the illegal entry of foreigners and find employment for them. Under new provisions, even company directors and managers may end up in jail or get the whip if they employ illegal foreigners.

The question of enforcement will be most crucial. Although the seriousness of the problem is acknowledged, the Government has been known to be very lenient with offenders. Which explains why thousands have not bothered to obtain the permits, their ICs or driving licences. Somehow, the authorities are expected to extend a deadline and then extend it further.

This, of course, has to stop. If the authorities allow such people to get away and reaffirm their belief that deadlines are meant to be extended, then very little will be achieved by Malaysians and this nation. It may be excessive to bring in the 2020 deadline in the picture, but imagine what would happen to visions if deadline is dead.

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