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Ending the nation's labour woes

VERY few things about the economy grow more impressively than the Gross Domestic Product. One of them is the growth in the number of foreign workers in this country. The other, although this is not quantifiable, is our growing dependence on this imported labour. A decade ago, claims by some trade union leaders that half a million foreign workers were illegally working in plantations, especially in Sabah and Sarawak, were brushed aside as being too excessive. Today, some 1.7 million foreign labourers are employed in various industries. The more the Government appeals to the private sector to reduce their dependence on these workers, the faster their numbers seem to increase.

In the past week alone, various statements were issued by the leaders asking Malaysian jobseekers not to be too choosy when they look for jobs and asking employers to find ways to diminish the need for foreign labour. The National Labour Advisory Council (NLAC) chaired by Human Resources Minister Datuk Lim Ah Lek even agreed that for every foreign worker hired, hotels in the country will be required to hire a local. The Cultural, Arts and Tourism Minister, Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik, went one step further, saying that the hotel industry has been directed to stop employing foreign workers. The NLAC, which is the highest tripartite body overseeing labour policies and programmes, re-emphasised the need to step up training programmes for locals. Lim, in a related development, warned employers who retrench local staff and replace them with foreign workers that action will be taken. There was also a newsreport to say that the Government has imposed a freeze on the employment of new Filipino maids. During his visit to Sabah, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told the people that if they leave the foreigners to do the jobs they should be doing, one day Malaysians will lose their country to the foreigners. And yesterday, Deputy Home Minister Datuk Tajol Rosli Ghazali brought the axe down: there are to be no further intakes of foreign workers.

Certainly, everybody recognises the enormity of the problem facing them and the nation. With a labour force that has not reached 10-million, there is one foreign worker to every five Malaysian workers. If foreign workers were needed primarily in plantations and on construction sites a decade ago, they are now almost everywhere: in hotels, factories, gas stations, restaurants, hawker stalls, pubs, nightclubs, grocery shops, supermarkets, hospitals, and of course our homes. Many of them have opened their own restaurants and other small businesses, or are street peddlers, cabbies, public transport drivers and cobblers. If Malaysians are comfortable with this, there will be no stopping their progress. Hopefully, the authorities will not wait until foreigners join the police and armed forces, teach children in schools and at university, approve applications for loans and other requests, or even stand for general elections and govern this country before they decide to act.

To date, the Government has done everything diplomatic to address the issue but soft measures do not bite. There has been enough talk about reducing dependence and one too many half-hearted measures to resolve the problem. It is time for the Government to decentralise efforts to reduce foreign workers. Each ministry should set up a task force to look into the problem, instead of just depending upon a single national taskforce to solve the entire problem or to the Home Ministry and the Human Resources Ministry. The Budget could look at penalising employers who hire foreign

workers by increasing the levy. Employers should be compelled by law to set up nurseries that will help retain working mothers and encourage unemployed housewives to contribute to the economy. These nurseries could also kill another bird: reducing the dependence on maids. Incentives can be provided to employers to set up nurseries and cut down the number of foreigners. There will be certain sectors that must continue to rely on foreign labourers, but they should be very few and far between.

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