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Firm hand on alien deployment

THE Government's reiteration that the freeze on foreign worker intake stays is reassuring. This week's announcement that the present 1.2 million registered ones are adequate for the nation and "from now on, there is no need to bring in more" shows the authorities' resoluteness in reducing the country's dependence on foreign labour.

The clarification is made in response to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's recent statement that the Government will allow a gradual increase of foreign workers if export-oriented industries require a larger workforce.

With some 800,000 illegal aliens in our midst and this number is increasing, there is no doubt that a firm hand is needed to deal with the foreign labour situation before it overwhelms us. Moreover, in these challenging times, reducing the annual RM4 billion repatriation of funds by alien workers will help in cutting the country's current account deficit.

After the many moves to better control the alien population which have attracted some flak from the affected public, it is quite clear by now that the Government is setting its priorities right in tackling the problem.

From August 16 next year, work permits will only be issued if they are supported by recommendations from the respective ministries. Recognising the tight labour situation in certain crucial sectors, especially the plantations and manufacturing industries, the move to prioritise the distribution of the existing foreign labour is indeed a step in the right direction.

The decision to redeploy the big number of foreign workers from the service sector is in line with the persistent calls on the industry, such as hotels and those in the tourism field as well as restaurants, fast-food chains and stalls, to recruit locals for the jobs. The industry, for instance, can recruit from the large reservoir of school leavers each year.

While foreign labour is seemingly easier to control, recent reports indicate that this is no longer true, at least in the construction industry. The move by these workers in holding employers "to ransom" by threatening to leave if their wage hike demands are not met has been condemned. The decision to send some 260,000 workers to the export-oriented industries, especially plantations, with a warning that those who refused will be repatriated, should send a clear message to foreign workers as a whole that they cannot dictate terms, particularly under the present difficult economic conditions.

Admittedly, the Government's move to be on top of the foreign labour situation is an arduous task. The requirement from next month that registered workers wear tags, which carry colour and numerical codes to denote the sectors they work in for easy identification, is another step forward. To really get results, it is imperative that violators, including those who aided and abetted them, be severely punished to make examples of them to act as a deterrent.

Incarceration is a feared sentence. The amended immigration laws provide mandatory jail and a stiff fine for employers found harbouring more than five foreigners. The much-lauded recent six-month jail for a contractor who carried out open burning is an indication that many Malaysians are for

the meting out of such punishment to those who take the easy way out.
There should be no compromise in the country's move in achieving an
orderly deployment of foreign labour.

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