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Canteen-Reaction

FOOD PRICES IN SCHOOL CANTEENS WILL BE MAINTAINED

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 24 (Bernama) -- The Education Ministry has given an assurance to maintain the food prices in school canteens following the intention of the canteen operators to increase the prices of all types of foodstuff by up to 100 per cent.

Education Director-General Datuk Matnor Daim said today the ministry was prepared to discuss the matter with the Association of School Canteen Operators Malaysia (Ascom) to jointly settle the problem.

"I am surprised at the statement in view of the current economic situation and the fact that the decision was taken without discussions with the Education Ministry," he told Bernama when contacted in Kuching.

He was asked to comment on Ascom president William Huee Thing Hoa's statement yesterday that the association's 10,000-odd members had agreed on the price increase because of spiralling operating and rental costs, difficulty in getting workers and the imposition of various licence fees.

Matnor said an increase in canteen food prices would have a great impact on students nationwide and a detailed study must be conducted to avoid problems.

Meanwhile, the National Union of Teaching Profession (NUTP) threatened to launch a campaign to boycott school canteens if Ascom went ahead with its plan.

NUTP secretary-general N. Siva Subramaniam, who said this, urged the canteen operators to heed Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's call to all parties to make sacrifices and not to take the advantage of the current economic crisis to raise prices.

A price increase would also have adverse consequences as the students would turn to hawkers who were likely to sell cheaper without caring for cleanliness and nutritional value, he said.

Subramaniam also advised parents to pack food for their children to take to school to save expenses and ensure cleanliness.

The headmaster of Sekolah Kebangsaan Damansara Utama, Dzulkifli Jamhari, called on Ascom to review its decision because a price increase would burden the students, parents and teachers.

He said although the prices of raw materials had risen, this could be resolved through other means.

Sekolah Rendah Keramat AU3 co-curriculum senior assistant Ooi Hock Leong said an increase of 20 per cent or 30 per cent might be acceptable but not 100 per cent.

In KUCHING, Sarawak Teachers Union (STU) president William Ghani Bina said any increase of canteen food prices under the present economic situation would have negative impact on the development of education with a possible increase in school dropouts.

He said a price hike would force students to work after school hours to help meet the additional expenses as parents were already facing the high cost of daily essentials.

Ghani said the school canteen menus should also be reviewed to include more locally-sourced items to avoid a price hike.

He said although the school canteen food prices had not been reviewed for 10 years, the operators should take into account the present economy and the interests of the country's four million students.

In KUANTAN, Menteri Besar Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob called on the canteen operators to reconsider their move in the interests of everyone as the

parents might decide to pack food for their children and discourage them from buying canteen food.

He said the proposed increase would also burden parents, especially those in the urban areas, who already had to pay the bus fares.

In KANGAR, Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim strongly opposed the mover saying that it was improper to increase the canteen food prices at a time when the people and country were facing an economic slowdown.

Meanwhile, the Education Minister's office, in a statement today, expressed surprise over the proposed increase and questioned the legality of Ascom which it said was deregistered in 1987.

Logically, Huee was not qualified to make any press statement in Ascom's name, it said.

The statement said that only those whose quotations were accepted by the government were allowed to operate school canteens.

It dismissed the claim that the canteen rentals had increased annually because the rentals were included in the quotations.

Malaysian Muslim Students Association secretary-general Ahmad Shabrimi Mohamed Sidek said the proposed increase could cause a student's food expenses to reach RM80 a month. -- BERNAMA

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