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For better control of aliens

IT is an understatement to say that Malaysia's dependence on foreign labour in its rapid industrialisation pace is causing the country a headache. As events unfolded in the past year, locals could not help but gather the impression that if no effective solution is found to deal with the burgeoning problem, it will inevitably develop into a nightmare for the Government and the people. The end result as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad aptly warned on Monday may be that the country will be swamped and its security endangered.

Engaging foreign workers is not a bad thing per se and is not unique to Malaysia which faces an acute labour shortage. It was not long ago that Parliament was told that foreign labour will continue to play a prominent role in the construction and plantation sectors beyond the year 2000. But having said that, we cannot turn a blind eye to the negative consequences of foreign labour employment from the economic, social and security viewpoints. Thus, the Government's announcement on Wednesday that recruitment of unskilled foreign labour for all sectors will be frozen with immediate effect, comes as no surprise to many. Swamped with 1.7 million foreign workers, including illegals, the rumblings and signals had been there for a while. Apart from statements by the top leaders, more stringent laws have been introduced and there are the actions to regularise and to hunt down illegals. In addition, approvals for new entry permits for foreign workers in the construction, services and plantation sectors have stopped since July 10 last year. All these point to a rigorous effort to tackle this difficult problem and bring it under control.

Judging by the Government's rationale for imposing the total freeze until an appropriate time "when the situation is brought under control", the behaviour of employers and foreign workers may have hastened the clampdown. While many employers are no doubt acting in good faith, it is evident that not a few are exploiting the situation in opting for expediency. For some time now the authorities have warned employers not to displace locals for foreigners just because they are easier to control and to exploit. This is another reason for the freeze, to compel employers to give preference to locals. Last week's long queues of employers to renew work permits for their foreign workers at the eleventh hour, almost throwing the renewal exercise with its Aug 15 deadline out of gear, might have also exasperated the authorities.

"We have to do this because it seems that employers feel that they have the right to recruit foreign workers. Employers get angry if we are late in processing the applications ... Worse, foreign workers have adopted the attitude that they have a right to work in Malaysia," said Deputy Home Minister Datuk Tajol Rosli Ghazali, in announcing the drastic government action. Indeed, we could not agree more.

It is clear from the authorities' statement that it is anxious to effectively deal with the foreign workers' entry problem. Tajol Rosli revealed that the ministry is devising a mechanism to tackle it but was short on details. It is imperative that the Government adopt a holistic approach by addressing foreign labour issues from all angles and focusing on long-term solutions. Employers and workers' unions have to aid in this important task for their own good and that of the country.

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