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Foreign workers may be sent to key sectors

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - A new mechanism to enable foreign workers in the country be re-deployed to sectors facing a labour shortage will be proposed to the Cabinet by Primary Industries Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik.

The move will help secure higher foreign earnings as these sectors are key foreign exchange earners with little imported content.

Dr Lim said the alternative was to lift the freeze on recruiting foreign workers for these sectors.

The shortage of workers, worsened by the freeze on the recruitment of unskilled foreign labour in 1995, had affected productivity in the primary industries especially plantation.

"The labour problem faced by primary industries is also affecting downstream activities.

"Besides plantations, factories are affected. They include sawmills and furniture, and rubber and palm oil processing factories," Dr Lim said after launching his Ministry's family day celebration at the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia in Kepong.

The country was short of at least 50,000 estate workers. Furniture factories need about 7,000 workers.

"We have to encourage export-oriented industries as they can bring in higher foreign earnings.

"This can help reduce the current account deficit," Dr Lim said.

He said one way to overcome the shortage was to allow primary industries to employ foreign workers from other sectors.

These workers can be those who are out of a job or whose employment contract with their employers may have expired.

Many of these foreign workers are brought in for the construction industry.

"Some contractors and employers just leave their workers in the country after a particular project has been completed.

"We can make use of these workers but we do not know how and where to find them," Dr Lim said.

Therefore, he would suggest that the Government establish a mechanism to facilitate the redeployment of the foreign workers.

"I am worried because the shortage of workers is preventing the country from gaining extra foreign earnings. And this is at a time when the country is facing economic problems," he said.

Dr Lim had said in October that the plantation industry would stand to lose about RM1.02 billion in uncollected oil palm fruits this year due to the labour shortage. This is as a result of the Government's freeze on the intake of foreign workers.

The Government had banned the recruitment of unskilled foreign labour in August 1995 to reduce the number of foreign workers which totalled some 1.7 million.

However, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had said last month that foreign companies which produced 100 per cent export items would be allowed to use existing foreign workers or bring in new ones.

The Government would, at the same time, encourage the industries to use automation or robots as they had proved to improve productivity.

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