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Anwar-Corps

JULY 22 LAUNCH DATE FOR M'SIAN VOLUNTEER CORPS

KUALA LUMPUR, May 22 (Bernama) -- Malaysia's own social service volunteer corps, Yayasan Salam which is akin to that of the United States' Peace Corps, will be launched on July 22.

Acting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, who announced this today, called on fresh graduates aged 18 and above and pensioners with special skills to sign up as volunteers.

They are to perform community services locally or abroad for stints between 12 and 24 months.

"Male and female volunteers will be paid enough allowances for food and lodging besides insurance coverage and medical benefits during their stints," he said when briefing voluntary organisations at the Prime Minister's Department here on the programme's launching.

The US' Peace Corps, created in 1961 as a brainchild of the late President John F Kennedy, currently has 7,000 volunteers serving in 94 countries.

Kennedy's vision was for an international volunteer service made up the young Americans skilled in education, agriculture and health, among others, working for two years abroad to help in the development of Third World countries.

Malaysia has had the services of Peace Corps volunteers during the period between 1964 and 1983.

The establishment of Malaysia's Salam volunteer corps speaks of the country's attainment of the status of a middle-income country (last year's per capita income was US\$4,432 or RM11,081) and a no longer aid-recipient nation.

Anwar said the corps, an independent non-governmental organisation, was an extension to the country's endeavour towards improving the lot of the less fortunate within and outside the country after years of building a laudible international image and reputation.

The corps' activities, focusing on education, health and community development, would be financed by donations from individuals and corporations.

Salam, a non-profit organisation set up in November 1996, was mooted by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who thought it was time that Malaysia helped the less fortunate abroad but, at the same time, not forgetting displaced people at home.

Anwar said by setting up the corps, the government was also reviving volunteerism among Malaysians which was being eroded by the country's rapid economic development.

The current United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) president Tan Sri Razali Ismail has been appointed chairman of the Salam Foundation, Anwar said.

Its other board members are president of the Association of Retired and Senior Citizens Volunteer Programme Abdullah Malim Baginda, former Deputy Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Samsuri Arshad, Masidi Manjon (representing Sabah) and the Member of Parliament for Santubong Puan Rohani Karim (representing Sarawak).

A task force, headed by chairman of Centre for Peace Initiative (Cenpeace) Anuar Tahir, will coordinate the corps' activities which would also involve the Education, Youth and Sports and the National Unity and Social Development ministries.

At a dialogue later Anwar gave assurance of the government's full support for the corps despite it being voluntary because the nation's image will be at stake especially when the volunteers are abroad.

He said volunteers would be adequately prepared through induction courses which would also familiarise them with the languages and cultures of the countries where they would serve.

Anwar said the question of leave for volunteers from among government and private sector staff would need careful study as it involved being away for long stints.

He said it was for this reason that priority in selecting volunteers would be given to fresh graduates and pensioners since government departments or companies would be quite reluctant to release their staff on full pay to serve with the corps.

Anwar first mentioned about the Salam volunteer corps when opening the National Youth Day Rally and Convention here last May 15 where he said the country's economic well-being now should not diminish volunteerism which was a strong Malaysian trait before.

He said the government's mission was not only that of economic empowerment but also cultural empowerment of the people and that volunteerism was one virtue that should be continuously nurtured among the young people.-- BERNAMA

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