

22/11/1997

Leaving no room for exorbitant prices and profiteering during Lima

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WITH the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition comes a boom time for the business sector on the island after a lull, worsened by the recent haze, especially for hotels, restaurants, hawker stalls, shopping outlets, taxis and car hire operators.

But for the authorities, especially the enforcement division of the Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Ministry, the fourth Lima show from Dec 2 to 7, is time to keep a lookout for exorbitant prices and profiteering by businessmen.

Except that this time there has to be more vigilance.

Not that this is the first time they are taking a look at the prices of goods and services, especially food, on the island resort.

In fact the Ministry has a price stabilisation committee which has been meeting regularly over the last few years.

What with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad keeping close tabs on the island resort, including his remarks on profiteering.

When the price stabilisation committee held one of its regular meetings earlier this week chaired by Ministry Secretary General Datuk Mohd Noor Abdul Rahim, it had to be content with the latest voluntary comments by Dr Mahathir.

The Prime Minister who was in Langkawi over the weekend to look into the preparations for Lima 97, the biggest thus far, wanted the authorities to get the food and other service sectors to display their menus and prices.

He also directed that drinks and food packets be banned from being brought by visitors to the exhibition venues as this was bound to cause littering.

Talk of profiteering during such occasions tend to upset the local residents including District Officer Ismail Hamid, though they are directed at a small group of exploiters who have no qualms about fleecing customers.

Ismail and a few others feel that it is the Press which is harping on the matter even in the case of the latest remarks by Dr Mahathir, which came when he interrupted a briefing being given to him on the preparations for Lima, to direct the authorities.

Whether one likes it or not, a small group of unscrupulous traders which include food outlets, have to be dealt with as they give the impression that prices of goods and services are generally high.

On the contrary, prices of non-dutiable goods including food are not much higher than in Alor Star. This is despite the fact that Langkawi imports nearly all its perishable and non-perishable goods from the mainland and Thailand via Satun which involves higher shipping costs.

As the director of the enforcement division of the Ministry, Datuk Abdul Jabbar Kamin put it: "the battle to weed out the bad hats has to go on."

Over the next few days, he said all food outlets must comply with the current requirement to display their menus and prices in a clear and bold manner.

The authorities will also be on the alert for Thai citizens who operate stalls leased by local residents during the period. Both parties will pay heavy penalties.

The prevailing rates of other service providers like car rentals and taxis will be put up by the division in strategic areas for people to know if they are being overcharged. The media has also been requested to

highlight the rates.

Hotel and chalet operators will also not be spared. Though they are reluctant to display their rates like the food outlets, they have agreed to provide brochures spelling out their rates.

But the hospitality sector is the least of their worries as all 6,500 beds available on the island were snapped up months ago with full payment made well in advance.

Nearly all hotels dispensed with discounts or corporate rates and charged the full published rates.

The worry, however, will be the prices at the temporary food outlets at the venues - the Mahsuri International Exhibition Centre (aerospace) and Tanjung Malai (maritime), especially the former.

With the high rental rates for temporary food outlets in MIEC charged by the organisers, the operators have to pass the costs to the customers.

For instance in the last Lima, a large bottle of mineral water was sold at RM8 with the excuse that the operators had to cover rental costs.

Perhaps the organisers should take this into consideration and be reasonable in their levies, or the trade exhibitors and visitors especially foreigners will return home with the impression that Langkawi is an expensive place. This is bad for repeat visits which are vital for the success of the tourism industry.

To nab those out to cash in on the huge Lima turnout, enforcement officers from northern Perak, Penang, Perlis and mainland Kedah will be mobilised to carry out checks.

All these efforts will come to nought if the consumer does not play his role. Besides looking up at the skies for aircraft and the sea for the submarines, they must look out for the prices and make their choice.

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