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MIC to present paper on estate workers woes

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SEREMBAN, Sun. - The MIC will forward a working paper to all Menteri Besars and Chief Ministers detailing suggestions on how the respective States can overcome woes plaguing estate workers in the country.

Its president, Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu, said their main grievance was the hardship they encountered in finding a home when their estates were converted for development purposes.

He said the compensation afforded to them when they left the estates was still based on an agreement made 30 years ago between the Malaysian Agricultural Producers Association and the National Union of Plantation Workers.

Under this agreement, the worker would only receive 22 days of salary multiplied by his years of service. "This amount is far from sufficient and most workers are unable even to afford low-cost houses."

Speaking to reporters after officiating a State-level MIC convention here, he said he would also forward a proposal to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on adequate compensation for the affected workers.

He also said the MIC would call for a dialogue session with estate workers to enable them to forward their problems and suggestions.

"I will also ask the Human Resources Ministry to come up with its own suggestions on how best to safeguard the interests of these workers."

He said another major problem they faced was when they were asked to leave, they were not only at times left homeless, but their children were also left without a school to attend.

Samy said when the estates were converted, the schools where these children had been attending would also be closed and there was no provision for an alternative school.

"I will discuss this matter with Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and hopefully find a solution to the problem."

He said over the past few years, the number of Tamil schools in the country had dropped from 549 to 529 which was also mainly because of the number of estates being converted.

In Kuala Lumpur, Human Resource Minister Datuk Lim Ah Lek said today State Governments should impose pre-conditions on developers of estate lands to prepare alternative housing for workers affected by the development.

"State Governments have the power to impose this pre-condition on developers," he told reporters after attending the Selangor MCA convention.

Lim was commenting on Samy Vellu's call to amend the Labour Act to protect estate workers forced to stop work when the estates were sold.

A resolution seeking amendments to the Act would be tabled at the MIC delegates' meeting on Aug 3.

In Ipoh, Perak DAP treasurer M. Kulasegaran called on the Government to enact a law to ensure estate workers were provided with houses and other amenities before an estate was approved for development.

He said State Governments must set clear rules and unambiguous regulations regarding the conversion of estate land into housing or other development.

He welcomed the recent statement by Perak Menteri Besar Tan Sri Ramli Ngah Talib that developers who built their projects on estate land should

provide low-cost houses for the workers so that they would not be displaced.

He said the proposed law among others should stipulate that the developer provide land or make provisions for the building of low-cost houses and other amenities such as schools, graveyards and places of worship.

Kulasegaran, also the Teluk Intan Member of Parliament, said all these conditions needed to be fulfilled before an application to develop the estate was approved by the Government.

"As it is now, State Governments do not impose the conditions but ask the developer to solve the displaced estate workers' problems."

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