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Move to raise number of middle-class Bumis

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - The Government has set up a technical committee to identify ways to increase the population of middle-class Bumiputeras.

Entrepreneur Development Minister Datuk Mustapa Mohamed said the middle class would also be re-defined to include the educational background of a family as well as values, and no longer restricted merely to income.

This was decided in a meeting chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim yesterday, which was attended by representatives of ministries associated with the development of Bumiputeras, Menteris Besar and officials from relevant departments.

Mustapa said the committee, which he will chair, is to submit a report to Anwar within two weeks before briefing Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"The meeting was held in view of the Prime Minister's concern over the small number of middle-class Bumiputeras.

"The ministry's role is to co-ordinate the suggestions and proposals made at yesterday's meeting and to evaluate the situation comprehensively."

Speaking after presenting certificates of excellence to 89 Mara staff today, Mustapa said the committee would also identify fields middle-class Bumiputeras would be encouraged to venture into; mainly in trading, franchising and services.

"What is important is to create a middle-class group which will be able to regenerate itself. Taking only salary or income into account would create a temporary middle-class group which lacks proper values and education."

Asked to reveal the percentage of middle-class Bumiputeras as opposed to the lower and upper class Bumiputera population, he said this would be disclosed after the committee carried out a thorough evaluation.

He also declined to divulge the ratio of the middle-class population according to the various races.

The Economic Planning Unit, Mustapa said, had compiled some figures but they were incomplete to give a true picture of the situation.

He, however, gave examples of how serious the situation had become.

In Padang Besar for instance, none of the 50 medium-cost houses have been bought by Bumiputeras, while in Kangar, only one of 30 units was purchased by a Bumiputera.

"This only manifests the absence of a strong middle-class Bumiputera society," he said.

Although Mustapa said reasons for the poor growth in middle-class Bumiputeras would only be determined after the committee met, he believed it could be because in the past, much of the attention went to assisting the underprivileged.

"Programmes initiated in the past have been successful but these programmes were overall efforts to alleviate poverty and not specifically aimed at any section of society.

"To some extent, it has produced more Bumiputera professionals, but not the desired number."

Earlier, Mustapa reminded Mara staff to pay attention to details when carrying out their duties.

He added there must also be a culture from the top management down, which placed importance on hands-on experience at the grassroot level.

He also advised Mara to evaluate its programmes, pointing out that one of the organisation's weaknesses was in analysing the success of its projects.

As a token of appreciation, the 89 Mara staff received a plaque, certificate of appreciation, one month's salary and seven days unrecorded leave.

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