

Room for a better Civil **service** 40/41

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Prime Minister **Datuk** Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad recently called on civil servants to help the private sector so that they **could continue paying taxes, thus preventing paycuts within the civil service.** Similar calls have been made before **and** it is time civil servants take heed, writes WAN **HAMIDI HAMID.**

THE presentation of excellent service awards to 227 staff members of the Prime Minister's Department at Pusat Islam on Friday was scheduled to begin at 11am but Dr Mahathir's entourage arrived 15 minutes later.

The Prime Minister delivered a speech to some 300 officers and employees of the Prime Minister's Department, mainly urging the civil service to work harder and be more efficient.

Despite the initial delay, the event ended five minutes before noon, the time the function was meant to end.

This prompted a staff member to say that the organisation of the function seemed to reflect Dr Mahathir's call.

"Usually, civil service functions, no matter how well-prepared, end later than planned. This time, everything went smoothly and the function ended earlier," he said.

The call by Dr Mahathir was for all the 850,000 civil servants to work harder and ensure speedy processing of business applications so that companies and firms could function efficiently and generate more income during the economic downturn.

When companies made profits, the Prime Minister said, the Government could collect taxes to finance its administration and development projects.

He said civil servants would get their share, too, as their salary depended on how much income the Government could generate from tax collections.

"Without the private sector and their taxes, we will not have enough money to manage and develop the country," said Dr Mahathir.

He added that the private sector was having problems not because of the Government or the civil servants but because of pressure from foreigners who had devalued the country's shares and currency value.

"We have the Client's Charter but it is not enough. We have to work harder and be more efficient," he said, adding that, red tape must be cut.

Early this year, some 80,000 civil servants have been drawing less take-home pay of between RM14 and RM606 following the cut in their civil service and entertainment allowance.

Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Abdul Halim Ali said the cuts had not adversely affected their performance, showing that they understood the need to support the Government in improving the country's economy.

Cuepacs secretary-general N. Siva Subramaniam, in supporting the Prime Minister's call, said civil servants could no longer take things for granted and should change their attitude to face the current challenge.

"However, civil servants alone cannot be blamed if all the while there has been red tape or other bureaucratic glitches. The prob-

lems also have to do with heads of departments who have no vision," he said.

"If the Prime Minister and his ministers can be friendly with the people any time and anywhere, why not the heads of departments?"

"Good heads are the ones who lead their department efficiently while bad ones create problems for all."

To increase productivity and efficiency, Siva Subramaniam proposed that departments try out new methods in resolving problems.

Citing an example, he said: "There are heads of departments who refuse to act, claiming there is no directive on a particular subject.

"Why should this be an obstacle when there are other heads who can use their discretion for the good of the public without having to wait for directives?"

Siva Subramaniam said civil servants would have to face the music if they failed to comply with Dr Mahathir's call which, he said, was not a personal plea but a call for the sake of the nation.

Singapore, although still economically strong despite the region's turmoil, has said that its civil servants would not receive any wage increase this year, while top bureaucrats would take a 1.7% cut in annual wages.

The adjustments were made following a recommendation by the trinartite National Waegs Council to 'contain wages as part of efforts to survive the current economic slowdown.

Dr Mahathir is adamant that civil servants work harder to reduce red tape as it would indirectly defend the country from foreign attacks, including those of the international currency speculators and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

"Although our civil service is recognised worldwide, the services given are no longer adequate during these trying times. We must do better and with more conviction," said the Prime Minister.

The civil service's support for the private sector is crucial to the country's economy as it relates directly to the current issue of interest rates which, if wrongly implemented, would mean recession and acute inflation.

Some economists believe that lowering the interest rates as advocated by Dr Mahathir and the Government's economic adviser Tun Daim Zainuddin, who was recently appointed Minister of Special Functions, would save a lot of companies from going bust.

But cynics, preferring to rely on the contemporary thinking of raising interest rates to stabilise the currency, pointed out that saving companies at the expense of the nation's economy would only profit a few.

"Some people still have the notion that if companies go down, they will not be affected. They seem to forget that all workers work with companies and even civil servants are not spared if there are no more companies for the Government to tax," said a business analyst.

It would avoid recruiting new staff in line with the Government's aim to downsize the civil service, said Halim.

At the same time, Halim said the Government would continue to reward good and hardworking civil servants with increments and other incentives under the New Remuneration System despite the economic slowdown.

"This is a contractual obligation which the Government will continue to offer to excellent and deserving employees," he added.

Calling on civil servants to rally behind the nation, Siva Subramaniam, who is also National Union of the Teaching Profession (NUTP) general secretary, said they had to be progressive as there was still room for improvement.

He said public complaints to the Anti-Corruption Agency and the Public Complaints Bureau showed that people were fed up with some of the services provided.

"Although our civil service is one of the best in the region, there are still weaknesses in the system," he added.

"We can improve and while employees do their best by changing their attitude and be more disciplined and hardworking, department heads should be more innovative.

"The Government, too, should be brave enough to accept changes. Bad department heads should be replaced by younger ones with proper vision and correct work attitude."

Perhaps the advice of former Brazilian football coach Carlos Alberto Parreira should be heeded in ensuring the success of teamwork.

For him, the winning formula is "zero mistakes, maximum efficiency - get the players mentally and physically tough so that they will not make any mistake, and use your resources as best you can".

Our civil service should work along the same lines.