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A gesture of magnanimity

THE financial aid to civil servants is a strong reflection of the Government's oft-repeated promise that it will not be oblivious to the plight of the people in times of economic distress.

This is no easy task especially when the current economic climate dictates prudent expenditure. As evidenced by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's apology to the civil servants, the no-bonus decision was a hard decision for the Government since it has always been its intention and practice to pay bonus in appreciation of the contributions and services of the civil servants. The amount may be modest but still generous under the circumstances when the country is being run on a deficit budget. The RM400 in aid to each of the 848,000 civil servants will cost the Government RM340 million - a small but significant amount in the context of a RM16.1 billion deficit budget.

Evidently, the shortage of funds has not deterred the Government from making a goodwill gesture. It is obvious from the unexpected announcement on the aid that the Government has taken serious note of the appeals by Cuepacs to help lessen the financial burden of the public sector employees. This stems from the Government's realisation that the economic crisis has been worse for those in the lower income bracket who have to grapple with the price rise in essentials and other consumer items. As expressed by Dr Mahathir, it appreciates the problems faced by the workers.

Although the recession has bottomed out, as manifested in Bank Negara's third quarter report, it does not necessarily translate into immediate relief since the monthly take-home pay of many civil servants has been reduced owing to the cut in overtime allowance and other benefits. While parsimonious spending is the order of the day, the extra cash will help meet expenses of their school-going children and the coming festive celebrations. At least, Christmas, Hari Raya Puasa and Chinese New Year will be brighter for the Government employees.

It is commendable that the civil servants did not react predictably or obnoxiously to the no-bonus decision, as many in some countries would have done, by staging demonstrations or strikes and other disruptive industrial action. They did not politicise the issue. They continue to toil selflessly in the name of public service. This has been recognised by the Government which recorded its appreciation for their maturity and positive attitudes. Much credit goes to their patience in the face of economic adversity. This virtue also extends to the private sector and, as Dr Mahathir says, the employers should appreciate the workers' moderate approach and entertain the workers' demands where possible.

As pointed out by Dr Mahathir, the civil servants have a role in helping to revive the country's ailing economy. The faithful implementation of economic measures, including the removal of red-tape, will result in a faster economic rebound. They must show a steely resolve to increase the country's productivity since anything less than efficient service will put the country in even more dire straits.

No one should block, sabotage or put on hold the Government's initiatives. Recalcitrant or defiant bureaucrats must fall in line. Propriety is the hallmark of the public sector's conduct. There should be no chinks in its integrity. Bureaucratic efficiency must be matched by accountability.

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