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A little help goes a long way

THE Government must spend RM339 million to pay the 848,000 civil servants RM400 each in the form of financial assistance as announced by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Wednesday. This is a lot of money, more so now with the economy still in the doldrums and the country braced for a budget deficit next year. If the Government were to pay a bonus to its employees, it would have to spend a great deal more. Dr Mahathir regrets that the Government cannot afford to pay a bonus this year. But can it afford to part with the RM240 million?

Hardly. But this is a sacrifice the Government has to make. Politically, this is a gesture by the Government to show that it fully appreciates the difficulties facing its workers. But this is not money to make the civil servants happy or to ensure that they do not disrupt industrial harmony because they did not get anything. The RM400 is to help ease some of the year-end financial burdens the workers will face. There will be books and new uniforms to buy for school-going children. The money can also be used to celebrate Christmas, Hari Raya and Chinese New Year in the moderate and modest way in which they should be celebrated. The hedge fund managers and currency speculators who brought economic and financial misery to this region did not pause to consider whether or not Asian children would get their ang-pows, Christmas gifts or new pairs of shoes. Or if their parents could afford to buy text books. Children in countries that have been severely hit by the crisis may not even get enough to eat.

For most civil servants, the RM400 in financial assistance will not buy them a lot. For the past few years, they have been paid at least a month's bonus. But these are hard times and they will have to stretch it. Every sector of the economy is having to do with less because revenues and profits have suffered from the economic downturn. For the lower-income workers though, the RM400 in financial assistance will come in handy. Spent wisely, the money will serve its purpose and ease some of the year-end blues facing the typical Malaysian household.

The private sector would do well to emulate this caring approach by the Government, which is by far the country's largest employer. Even in taking the easy way out, which is to cut wages and allowances, employers can still have a heart. As Dr Mahathir pointed out, employers who cannot afford to raise the salaries of their workers this year should not do so but can instead introduce allowances that are not fixed and will not burden them too much. Where possible, the employers should try and meet the workers' claims. This is the natural way to express appreciation for the attitude of moderation and responsibility shown by the Malaysian workers in general during these difficult times. In some countries hit by the same crisis that has brought Malaysia its current problems, workers and their trade unions have become even more militant and demanding, making an already bad situation even worse.

When that happens, confidence will take even longer to be restored. Foreign investors who are "shopping around" in this region - especially those who are in this region for the first time - will certainly look for a place that is relatively stable and calm. Over the past 18 months, most Malaysian trade unions - except for a very few that are still being irritatingly and unnecessarily militant over the most trivial of issues - have demonstrated their ability to be a positive influence that could help foreign investors choose Malaysia. Despite the economic problems, this

country can still boast about being one of the best as far as industrial relations are concerned, not only in the region but also worldwide. Tripartism is alive in this country and those who have been protesting in the streets are not trade unions or workers.

This industrial harmony was achieved not just by the Human Resources Ministry or by a Government that was willing to dig into the deepest recesses of its pockets to ease the burden of its employees, but by responsible and mature trade union leaders. Whenever possible, companies in the private sector should also demonstrate how much they appreciate the trade union leaders' gestures and their workers' contributions and dedication.

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