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Let's face reality

WE cannot afford to lose focus in our concerted efforts to revive the economy. But Cuepacs' move to appeal against the Government's decision not to pay civil servants any bonus this year threatens to distract both the Government and the civil service from the task at hand. Considering the current economic scenario and the RM16.1 billion deficit in the 1999 Budget, it is an ill-considered move that reflects the naivety of Cuepacs' leadership.

As pointed out by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad recently, expenditure must be carefully prioritised. Time and time again, the Government has pleaded with the rakyat to make some sacrifices for the sake of the country's economic recovery. Surely, Cuepacs does not consider the payment of bonus as an essential expenditure when the entire country is being administered on a deficit budget? It insists it is not demanding that bonus be paid. If that is so, what is the ultimate aim of the proposed appeal and what does it hope to achieve from such an exercise?

Its statement that it realises difficulties confronting the Government sounds hollow. While we laud its show of magnanimity in postponing negotiations for a review of salaries and allowances, we do not think the sacrifice of an unrealistic exercise should be made as a bargaining point for it to push for another unrealistic and unreasonable exercise.

Cuepacs is making a profound misreading of the situation if it thinks it has a meritorious basis in reversing the Government's "no bonus" decision. Like all organisations, it has a duty to meet the needs of its members but it should not lose sight of national goals and interest. No one is in any position to dictate anything to its leadership. However, we hope that its leadership will refuse to be populist and give in to political compulsions within the organisation. There is fear among some members of the public that civil servants' productivity will be affected by the non-payment of bonus and this will have an adverse effect on our efforts to revive the economy. But we are confident that Cuepacs will not play politics with the country's economy since to do so is to hold the nation to ransom.

Cuepacs ought to be thankful that despite the harsh economic climate and the pressures on the Government for fiscal restraints, the Government has not taken any radical measure such as pay cut and retrenchment of workers. Unlike its counterparts in the private sector who have to face pay cut and retrenchment, its members are rest assured of employment. Job security is a luxury in hard times.

We do not dispute Cuepacs' argument that the burden of the economic crisis is acutely felt by the lower-income group and the middle class. The regional economic crisis is nothing short of cataclysmic. But unlike our neighbours, we can still count our blessings. As it is, half of Indonesia's population of 200 million will be unable to afford food by year-end. The price of essentials such as rice, cooking oil and sugar has increased by 50 per cent while the price of infant formula and medicine has increased by 400 per cent and 100 per cent respectively. In South Korea, thousands of people lose their jobs each day.

No one, including Cuepacs, can afford the luxury of pessimism and negativism in our efforts to revive the economy. The public sector leads the way in these efforts. Cuepacs must act as a unifying force for the civil servants to render notable services to the country in these trying times.

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