

18 FEB 1998

ECONOMIC WOES MAY HATCH MORE CRIMES

Bernama Feature

By: ISABELLA HIEW

KUALA LUMPUR: The economic downturn hitting the country is causing untold worries, not least of which is crime.

"History has clearly illustrated the strong co-relation between the increase in crime during any economic turmoil," says Dr Mahmud Mazlan, secretary of the Malaysian Psychiatrists Association.

He cites the Great Depression of the 1930s in the United States, post-war Germany and Japan and the Mexican economic crisis, as examples where the deepening economic crisis was matched by a rising crime rate.

Consultant psychiatrist Datuk Seri Dr M. Mahadevan, with his vast experience also shared the view that "increase in crime during a recession is inevitable."

Thefts, burglary, robbery, confidence tricksters, criminal breach of trusts and other white collar crimes -- all normal fare in any society -- are going to add to the worry of the man in the street.

Dr Mahadevan says that the nouveaux riches or "newly rich" who amassed great wealth during the good times and adopted a luxurious lifestyle are finding it hard to keep up with this way of life as the economic crunch is already biting hard.

Some of them are no longer rich because of the tumble in the stock market and many find that they have to sell their luxury cars and property to settle their hefty losses incurred in buying stocks.

"These people may even resort to unethical business deals, issuing of dud cheques and embezzlement to raise the money needed," he says.

The others who will be involved in crime during the economic downturn will be "those pre-disposed to crime," Mahmud notes.

During the good times, they feel that they have enough to live by but during bad times, they turn to crime to make up the shortfall, he explains.

"They have an anti-social personality and are not bothered by what society thinks of them. It is not mental illness but a personality problem," he says.

Pointing to the situation in Indonesia as an example, Dr Mahadevan says during an economic crisis, rioting and looting may also occur.

Riots have erupted in some parts of Indonesia because of the spiralling price of staple foods caused by the critical economic crisis gripping the country.

But as observed by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad over the weekend, the situation in Malaysia was different as the country had adequate supply of foodstuff.

"For example, in the event the price of sugar rises by 100 percent, our expenses will remain the same if we consume only half of what we used to take."

The prime minister who ruled out any possibility of a food riot in the country said although prices had increased, they were minimal and supplies were adequate, which was "something of an achievement that has earned praises from any foreign visitors and diplomats."

Another psychiatrist also said in a recession, many workers are retrenched resulting in unemployment while those who are committed heavily in stocks or property will have cashflow problems.

Vice President of the Malaysian Mental Health Association, Dr Cheah Wing Yin, says, "These people may resort to pilferage, misappropriation of funds, dishonest business deals and outright cheating to obtain money."

He sees a "high possibility" of an increase of criminal activities like pickpocketing and burglary by the jobless.

Swindlers may become more resourceful in fleecing the gullible and the people must be on the watchout, he warns.

"The government must also send illegal immigrants home because they are a sociological problem by their involvement in crime," Cheah says.

Mahmud says that the migrant factor is a significant contributor to the increase in the crime rate during an economic crisis. In fact, in the United States, organised crime is mainly committed by migrants, even during normal times, he notes.

He sends out a warning for the need to anticipate similar gangland crimes by migrants in Malaysia, more so because the country is experiencing an economic downturn.

This is further compounded by workers being laid off from the dampened construction sector and these jobless migrant workers are hesitant to take on jobs in plantations because the areas are remote and isolated, not to mention the lower wages.

But amidst this gloomy scenario is the re-assuring news that the police are well aware, and well prepared, for the situation.

The police have stepped up security in the country to counter the anticipated increase in crimes. Deputy Inspector-General of Police Datuk Norian Mai was quoted recently as saying that the police will keep a close watch in areas with a high concentration of foreign workers.

The foreigners were expected to turn to crime because of joblessness, he had said.

What is also heartening in this trying times, is that these so-called socio-economic ills projected by the experts have yet to make its presence felt. The daily dosage of crime reported in the media are no more than the usual menu of even the good times. -- BERNAMA

IH