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## Speeding up affordable homes

FOR Malaysians in the lower income group, recent developments on the housing scene give them hope that at long last they will be able to have a roof over their heads. This week itself, there were more moves to facilitate the building and sale of houses costing not more than RM150,000.

The announcement that State Governments could use their own discretion in fixing the price of low-cost houses, based on the recently-approved ceiling and guidelines, is expected to spur the building of more affordable homes. The Cabinet has revised the RM25,000 ceiling price of low-cost houses to RM30,000, RM35,000 and RM42,000 depending on the location. With the price uncertainty removed, the Federal Government has rightly called on the States to speed up the building of such dwellings as they play a pivotal role in the national housing programme. State Governments have been urged to carry out immediate studies to review the prices for low-cost houses so that the new ceilings can be implemented for projects being planned. An encouraging sign is that some States are already taking the necessary steps. Providing cheap land will go a long way to alleviate the shortage of affordable homes.

Selangor has just pledged that it aims to meet the housing needs of the middle- and lower-middle income groups which have long been overlooked. It is studying the new price ceilings for low-cost houses and reviewing the price of low-medium and medium-cost houses. Malacca has taken a commendable move by giving a one-month deadline to the committee responsible for determining the prices of low-cost units to complete its study. Such exercises should not take too long as foot-dragging on the part of the authorities has all too often frustrated projects, delaying their take-off.

The Housing and Local Government Ministry's prompt statement this week also cleared the air on developers who have completed their projects but yet to put them up for sale. They can appeal to the Ministry to sell the units above RM25,000. With expected technicalities arising from the implementation of the new prices for low-cost housing nationwide, further clarifications from the Federal and State authorities from time to time will be a great help. Fears of developers shortchanging buyers are understandable as there will always be irresponsible elements in our midst. But the authorities should not allow this to stand in the way of judging cases on their own merits. Rigidity on their part may stifle growth.

That there is no lack of demand for low- and low-medium cost houses is again demonstrated in last week's long queue at the Selangor State Development Corporation's sales counters in Shah Alam. Some 5,000 people jammed the area for application forms from early morning to get the apartments priced between RM40,000 and RM60,000.

Undeniably, the biggest stumbling block to fast implementation of housing projects is bureaucratic red tape. The Cabinet has recently directed approving authorities not to delay the processing of applications. The Housing Developers' Association has welcomed Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's reinforcement of that directive by his call a few days ago for a revamp of the civil service to reduce red tape. Clearly, it is incumbent on the State and local authorities to positively heed such exhortation if they are sincere in helping the people

and the nation.

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