

31/01/1998

Workers needed to boost estate sector

Wendy Lim; Sreerema Banoo

FOREIGN workers who have skills in specific industries, such as the plantation sector, may have to be recruited if these sectors cannot obtain sufficient or appropriately-skilled labour, Primary Industries Minister Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik said.

"This is one aspect which has to be looked into if we are still not getting the right people for sectors which are in need of workers," he told reporters after attending Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's Hari Raya open house at Sri Perdana yesterday.

He added that with palm oil, rubber and cocoa fetching high prices, it was all the more important that production in the plantation sector be increased.

"And if we have sufficient and suitable workers for the plantation sector, then we can increase production and obtain foreign earnings," he said.

He added that there are issues which need to be looked into in terms of redeploying foreign workers who have been made redundant by other industries.

"One of the issues which needs study is that it is not possible to redeploy workers if they are not suitable, in a different sector. For example, a construction worker may not be suitable for employment in the plantation or manufacturing sector," he said.

Dr Lim said that should there still be a shortage of labour after the redeployment exercise, the situation will then have to be reviewed.

The Immigration Department will set up a matching mechanism to see how many workers are suited for redeployment in the plantation sector.

"We cannot afford to bring in more foreign workers. It is a matter of redeploying them and seeing how effective the mechanism is before we review the situation.

"In this case, those who have been retrenched and cannot find jobs here will have to be repatriated and new workers specially recruited for specific sectors will be allowed to come in," he said.

He stressed that even though the recruitment of new workers may be allowed, the number of workers repatriated will still be more than those hired.

Dr Lim also raised the question of the willingness of workers to go into the plantation sector.

He added that the Foreign Workers Task Force is to submit a report by the end of the month to the Cabinet Committee on Foreign Workers on the progress of the redeployment.

The minister had said earlier this month that the plantation sector, especially oil palm estates, were facing a severe shortage of about 60,000 workers resulting in a loss of revenue of RM2 billion.

He said this was based on a survey by the Malaysian Agriculture Producers Association.

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