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Working to fulfill a dream

A PIZZAMAHER'S dream of opening up a Malaysian pizza restaurant in New York certainly won't make national news, but it's food for thought for other entrepreneurs brooding over the economic downturn. Especially since Pizza Station Holdings Sdn Bhd owner Shaikh Hisham Muhammad AlBelwael isn't day-dreaming: his outfit has already started shipping the ingredients for his Malaysian-made pizza to neighbouring countries, opened 27 outlets in the Klang Valley and aims to have 105 more throughout the country in the coming years.

Such confidence is heartening, as we have had to swallow many stories about entrepreneurs - even major corporate players - reeling from the effects of the regional economic slowdown. The interesting aspect of Pizza Station is that it proves that many of the things the Government is trying to achieve are indeed viable. This is a story about marketing a Made in Malaysia product abroad, about boosting small businesses, about promoting the franchise concept, seeking opportunities even when the chips are seemingly down. With so many quarters trying discover the problems facing Malaysian businesses during the current economic difficulties, here is a story of a small business that believes it can make it. Hisham's may not yet be a success story that can be told to inspire others, but with a little help and encouragement he should be able to make his dream come true.

Hisham and many others are beneficiaries of programmes started by the Government to assist the development of small entrepreneurs. And the good news is that such assistance is not being held back even during the prevailing hard times. Entrepreneur Development Minister Datuk Mustapa Mohamed said the RM10 million Franchise Fund launched last October is only one-third taken up. Also, his ministry is considering setting up a new funding scheme to help small businesses. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has also made it clear that deserving businesses will be given the necessary assistance to get through the difficult times. The Malay Chamber of Commerce has taken the initiative to discuss with State Governments the problems facing Malay businesses and what everybody can do to help out. The whole government machinery, meanwhile, is finding ways to promote Made in Malaysia products locally and abroad. The Agriculture Ministry is promoting local food production in an effort to cut imports and boost self-sufficiency.

Despite all these efforts to help, success can only come if the entrepreneur makes an effort to succeed. This requires hard work and for businesses so used to the good times, that is perhaps the most daunting prospect. Which is why stories like Hisham and his Pizza Station are good for the soul of this country's entrepreneurship. As the Entrepreneur Development Minister said in an interview with this newspaper recently, the business community cannot expect the going to be as easy as before. Banks are more selective in giving out loans for business, consumers are not buying as much, imports are getting dearer, and exports are competing with even cheaper products and services from neighbouring countries. All the help and effort by the Government must be met by the entrepreneur's own innovativeness, hard work, perseverance and ability to make adjustments vis-a-vis economic changes not only in this country but also elsewhere.

Because of the economic situation, Hisham's dream of opening a Pizza

Station in New York may have to wait some years, maybe even many years, before it can be realised. But he has set himself this goal and is working towards achieving it. In a larger perspective, we must remind ourselves not to lose sight of the goals we have set. The economic turmoil of this region cannot be regarded as much more than a hiccup that a glass of water could not overcome. In other words, Malaysians must not allow prevailing problems to come in the way of their aspiration to become a developed society. We have determined our goals and set out programmes to help us achieve them; it is a matter of making the necessary changes, remaining committed to the vision, and working harder - a lot harder - to realise the dream.

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