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All should heed PM's call to cut red tape

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LAST week, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad directed district officers and senior state financial officials to speed up the process of disbursement of federal government's allocation to make sure development projects are carried out on schedule.

He also called for a revision of the financial administration system to reduce the red tape and speed up the disbursement process for the development allocation.

This is not the first time Dr Mahathir had touched on the need to eliminate bureaucratic obstructions.

In fact, the Prime Minister had, since he took office, continuously stressed the point that red tape must be eliminated if the nation is to be further developed. He had said that Malaysia could have gone through the developing era in the past but it was hampered by bureaucratic procedures and other obstructions.

This time, Dr Mahathir's directive came in the wake of a significant shortfall in the utilisation of government's allocations under the Seventh Malaysia Plan (1996-2000).

Dr Mahathir, speaking at the opening of the two-day national conference for some 230 district officers and senior state development officials in Bangi last Monday, had noted that in the first quarter of the year, between 7 per cent and 8 per cent of the allocation provided in the budget each year were spent.

Second Finance Minister Datuk Mustapa Mohamad, speaking in Parliament on April 8, had revealed that while the Government had targeted to disburse RM1.9 billion out of its annual total allocation of RM18.05 billion for the development projects in the first three months of this year alone, only RM932.98 million were spent.

Giving the monthly breakdown, Mustapa said RM3.8 million were spent in January, RM290 million in February and RM639.1 million in March this year. Last year, the Government allocated RM21.1 billion for development projects but a total of RM18.1 billion was spent.

The mind wonders as to why these federal government allocation for development projects for the rakyat were not spent. Is there still so much red tape within the Government administration that hinders the process of approving allocation for development projects?

If indeed government officials are the ones responsible for delaying the projects, then they have to be taken to task. The Finance Ministry, among others, plans to impose a surcharge on officers found to be responsible for delaying development projects.

Mustapa said it is one of the ways to prevent delay in the implementation of projects.

But this proposed surcharge should not only be imposed on district officers and development officers who are at the end of the line where the implementation of government projects are concerned but are the first to face the "firing squad" if these projects fail to take off or be completed on schedule as they take orders from those above them.

It would only be fair that the entire chain of command be "penalised" for creating unnecessary hindrance. These include ministers, secretaries-general of ministries and directors-general of the departments for not ensuring that allocations are disbursed and projects implemented according to schedule.

But if the so-called government procedures hinder these officials from carrying out their duties, then the Government should not hesitate to either review or eliminated them.

For starters, Mustapa had announced that the Government is allowing the ministries and Federal Government agencies the authority to approve tenders for projects worth RM30 million and below without having to refer to the Finance Ministry first.

Previously, projects costing RM15 million and above need the approval of the Finance Ministry before the go-ahead can be given.

But one has to bear in mind that Dr Mahathir's directive for ministries to utilise the bulk of this year's allocation for development projects by the end of the month is not the "greenlight" for ministers to spend on any kind of projects just to meet the call by the Prime Minister.

It is pertinent for ministers to be reminded that the allocation they give out for the approved development projects are that of the people and that the projects they approved should be the ones that benefit the people.

And ministers, the elected representatives of the people, are not only accountable to the Government but also to the people that elect them to ensure that the allocation is utilised wisely and that the projects are implemented on schedule.

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