

20/01/1999

`Trial run' for resumption of barter trade reveals shortcomings

A. Kathirasen

THE much-awaited resumption of barter trade between Myanmar and Penang started on the wrong foot. There was some confusion and the authorities were not fully prepared for the Myanmar vessel that arrived at Penang port on Jan 14.

In the end, the authorities decided to term it a "trial run" ... probably to save face.

There had been excitement among Penang traders when Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon announced on Dec 8 that the National Economic Action Council had given the green light for the resumption of the barter trade between Myanmar and Penang.

The State Government established a Penang Barter Trade Special Task Force headed by State Executive Councillor Datuk Dr Sak Cheng Lum.

The task force had directed the immigration, customs, port and other related authorities to complete preparations for the resumption of the trade by the end of the first week of January.

In the meantime, Penang traders had contacted their counterparts in Myanmar by facsimile and telephone to say that the trade which was stopped by the immigration authorities in 1993 due to "security reasons", would be revived.

But when the MV Aung Pan - a junk carrying 60 tonnes of onions arrived - the immigration authorities were caught off-guard.

The Home Minister had yet to sign the exemption order allowing the crew, most of whom did not have proper documents, to come ashore and carry out the barter trade.

However, since the Aung Pan was carrying onions which are perishable, and since the barter trade had been approved in principle and was only awaiting the formalities, the immigration authorities later allowed the onions to be unloaded at the Church Street Pier.

It is unfortunate that the port authorities did not allow reporters near the junk. Probably this was due to the fear that they would come to find out that the situation was somewhat messy. For the Press, it was a historic moment to record but permission was not granted to enter the pier.

While Dr Sak and immigration authorities termed it a "trial run", Penang Chinese Chamber of Commerce president Tan Sri Tan Kok Pin and traders described it as the resumption of barter trade.

The vessel is expected to return to Myanmar in a week's time taking with it biscuits, used clothes and old newspapers in exchange for the onions.

A dinner was held on Jan 16 to celebrate the occasion, hosted by Penang-Myanmar barter traders at the Berjaya Georgetown Hotel. However, no Myanmar national appeared to be present.

Dr Sak is confident that barter trading between Penang and Myanmar will proceed smoothly once immigration regulations are sorted out by next week.

He adds that the Home Ministry does not want a repeat of what happened in the past when Myanmar immigrants took advantage of the situation to enter the country illegally.

He says the "trial run" was "smooth" in terms of adherence to Customs, Marine Police and Harbour Master regulations. Only the immigration requirements need to be explained to the traders and the exemption order signed by the Home Minister.

Tan Chin Guan, manager of one of the companies involved in barter trade,

Induscor Supplies Sdn Bhd, believes more than 100 local companies will directly benefit from the trade that used to yield an annual turnover of about RM500 million in the past.

"Myanmar traders need local products such as electronic goods, textiles, old newspapers, used clothes, recycled engine oil, styrofoam, biscuits and old engine parts while they bring in food products such as onions, beans and other stuff such as wood," he says.

In allowing Myanmar nationals to come ashore and trade, the Malaysian authorities have to be wary of pirates and thieves masquerading as genuine traders.

If there is no need for proper documents, how is one to know that the products and produce being bought in are not stolen items? How is one to know that some amongst the Myanmar vessel crew are not robbers? This aspect of the trade has to be regulated properly or else Malaysians will end up buying stolen properties. So, there is need for prudence here.

Meanwhile, another drama is unfolding with the barter trade as the axis. Tan has criticised Koh and the State Government for being slow in acting to revive the barter trade.

He accused the State Government of acting "negatively towards the revival of Penang-Myanmar trade" and adopting "a low profile and a non-compromising attitude".

He has praised Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his leadership, saying Dr Mahathir listened to the chamber when it appealed for the revival of the barter trade.

Says Tan: "The Chief Minister should have played a leading role but he chose not to. Whenever the chamber brought up matters regarding the barter trade, the Chief Minister always said 'we will look into it' or 'we will give due attention' but nothing was done. The chamber had to directly deal with the Prime Minister and the Economic Planning Unit to revive the trade."

True, Tan did play a significant role in getting the Federal Government to allow the resumption of barter trade. However, the State Government also made some attempt to revive the trade.

Koh is State Gerakan chairman while Tan is a former State Gerakan vice-chairman. Recently, Tan has been openly critical of Koh and some political observers see this as a prelude to State party elections scheduled for later this year.

There are some who are afraid that the barter trade issue will become a tool in political manoeuvring leading up to the Gerakan State election.

This should not be. Personal problems and political differences should not figure in such important matters.

If the barter trade is to be successful, the State Government, the Chinese Chamber, the relevant authorities and traders must work together.

(END)