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Tackling bureaucratic delays

BY now, the full implication of the civil service's crucial role in aiding economic recovery should be realised by all, particularly the civil servants themselves. But 10 months after the Federal Government's firm directive that bureaucratic red tape be reduced to the barest minimum, it is clear that critical impediments to the implementation machinery remain.

Indisputably, the situation is serious. It was at an appropriate forum, the national district officers' conference on Monday, that the country's top leaders furnished the facts and expressed grave concern over the failure to fully disburse the allocations for projects. Sanguinely, the gravity of the shortfall in spending which will affect the Government's plan to revive the economy, has been driven home.

The importance of the public sector's role in increasing the aggregate demand in a downturn cannot be overemphasised. Indeed, the present unsatisfactory situation cannot be allowed to go on. The pronounced shortfalls in development expenditure cannot be taken lightly for they affect the country's productivity, revenue flow and social objectives. For instance, housing, especially low-cost units, is a pressing issue. This, as the NEAC has pointed out, needs greater attention not only to improve the housing facilities for the lower income groups but also to accelerate growth.

In the light of the recommendations at the conference, the Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Abdul Halim Ali has to take them up with alacrity. He has to immediately set up a task force to tackle this perennial problem once and for all. A holistic and co-ordinated approach is in order. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and First Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin made valid points. Daim hit the nail on the head in asserting that the time has come to re-look at existing approaches which may not be suitable during times of crisis. A review of the present financial administration system as suggested by Dr Mahathir is pertinent to expedite funds and reduce red tape.

The time for exhortations is over. Ironically, bureaucratic red tape does not only frustrate members of the public but also members of the bureaucracy themselves. Cuepacs has recently blamed high-ranking officials, such as secretaries-general and department heads, for being the cause of the delays. Halim's co-ordination team should investigate such allegation as it may throw some light on this problem.

The NEAC's remedial actions, including the setting up of a development action committee by all ministries, hold promise. That it is chaired by the respective Ministers to monitor the implementation of development projects and is required to meet once every fortnight, should provide the vital feedback. The questions which need answers include: are the senior civil servants, that is heads of ministries and departments responsible for disbursing allocated expenditure for projects, really the prima donnas? Do they encounter problems themselves? What about simplifying the present time-consuming procedures, such as the need for the controlling officers to seek approval for expenditure above certain limits from central agencies, notably the Treasury, the Economic Planning Unit and the Implementation and Co-ordination Unit in the Prime Minister's Department? Are they too many lines of command, directives and guidelines?

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