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Regular settler-Felder dialogues will do good

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WE wish to refer to the article "Settlers told to use Felde services" (NST, Jan 4).

Firstly we would like to congratulate Datuk Tan Aminuddin Ishak on his appointment as Deputy Menteri Besar of Pahang, with the prayer that he will be protected and guided by Allah.

We note with interest Tan Aminuddin's observations in the article, with respect to Felde settlers and would like to make some comments.

He seems to imply that the quality of fruits and trees must inevitably be inferior just because the settlers replant on their own.

Surely, without a proper, independent, in-depth representative study, such a conclusion would be rather premature and subjective.

The statement would also be demoralising to a group of innovators who have demonstrated courage and initiative in trying to make it on their own. Their decision obviously merits more attention.

It is our opinion that the essence of development is helping people move towards independence.

Malaysia has always expounded the philosophy of berdikari. It is to Felde's credit that over the years, they have managed to develop a group of settlers who now want to be berdikari. This is a reflection of Felde's success.

If, as suggested by Tan, after 30 years of patronage, with the settlers still unable to recognise good quality planting material or manage their lands properly, he would be doing a disservice to Felde.

Such request from the settlers should be celebrated, welcomed and supported, up to the point when settlers can run the entire Felde scheme on their own.

Perhaps the time has come to cut the proverbial "umbilical cord", thereby freeing the settlers from the bonds of dependency.

On the issue of low income, we agree that this could depend on the quality of the fruits. This however is not the only determinant. Pricing is another factor.

At this point, the best prices are only obtained under an open-market system where the settlers are free to sell to the highest bidder.

Such a situation cannot exist under a monopolistic marketing system where the settlers have no alternative but to sell to Felde.

On Aminuddin's advice to settlers to use the services of Felde as "this is for their own good", we feel that the statement is politically correct as this would be the expected reaction of a deputy head of Government.

However, such a statement by itself does not make the problem go away. The settlers themselves would know if the Felde services are of their own interests.

The fact that they have taken the initiative to replant on their own itself tends to indicate the existence of some underlying problems which have as yet to be articulated. Settlers need to be given the chance to provide justification for their inclinations.

As an organisation that has looked after the interest of smallholders and settlers for the past 25 years, the Persatuan Kebangsaan Pekebun-Pekebun Kecil Malaysia (PKPKM) is acutely aware of the trials and tribulations faced by its members.

PKPKM believes in advocacy and consultancy rather than the adversarial approach as the means to solve problems. We pledge our role as a neutral

intermediary, pro-actively helping the Government recognise and solve problems especially with respect to rural development and the plight of smallholders, farmers and settlers.

We concur fully with the advice of the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that representatives of the people should not treat in a cursory manner the problems voiced by the people, no matter how trivial.

What is important here is not what Felda has done but rather what the settlers perceive the Felda did. To ignore the aspirations of the settlers would be to invite serious consequences, as shown during the last election.

PKPKM, being neutral, is aware of such possibilities and is anxious to help prevent a repeat of such occurrence in the future in the interest of preserving harmony, national unity and uninterrupted development effort.

The issue of settlers wanting to carry out replanting on their own is becoming increasingly common and should be addressed through constructive engagement.

It should by no means be viewed as ingratitude. It is part of the "growing-up" process. We are confident that Aminuddin would agree to hold open dialogues between the settlers and Felda.

We hope, therefore, that he will use his influence to initiate such dialogues. This will provide a forum for increasing mutual understanding on the perceptions and aspirations of both parties.

If carried out in the spirit of syura, by laying aside all prejudices and preconceptions, such dialogues would facilitate win-win solutions to the benefit of all parties.

This will truly be the manifestation of the participatory approach to development. PKPKM will be happy to participate in such dialogues.

Finally, PKPKM would like to assure its support to Aminuddin with respect to any initiative to resolve settlers' problems in the firm belief that this would bring Felda to the final step, the crowning glory, if you will, in its development programme, namely helping the settlers up to the point where they could be truly berdikari. May Allah guide us always to the right path, bless and accept all that we do as ibadah.