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Stop the fighting

THE assurance by Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Norian Mai that the authorities will not allow clashes involving foreigners to affect the peace of this country is most reassuring. Fights between different groups of foreigners, sometimes over trivial matters, have grabbed newspaper headlines recently, a phenomenon described as "new for Malaysian society".

To avoid the spill-over effects, it is vital that stiff action be taken against the trouble-makers. Certainly, increasing patrols at construction sites are necessary besides punishing employers who hire illegal workers.

Even though legal immigration to Malaysia is not an issue among Malaysians, many critics are asking whether immigration has gotten out of control. They say a large number of immigrants, many of them illegal, cannot behave themselves. They fiercely retain the unsavoury aspects of their homeland's cultural identity and form immigrant enclaves along ethnic lines.

Still, as more and more locals shun menial work, the vacuum has to be filled by foreign labour, a fact which many should accept. However, the flow of illegal immigrants must be stemmed because of the strain it is placing on the country.

The present legal population of foreigners in Malaysia is over one million but it is anybody's guess as to the number of illegals.

The burdens of illegal immigration are immense. Among other things, these people bring in diseases long wiped out from Malaysia, putting pressure on the public medical facilities. Now, they are showing their clannish traits by fighting with one another.

It is significant that those involved in the recent hostilities were all illegal immigrants. The authorities have stepped up enforcement through Ops Nyah II to deport and deter those who have entered the country illegally.

But the factors fuelling illegal migration remain the same: job scarcity at home, higher wages abroad and the demand for cheap labour in Malaysia. These provide opportunities for illegal labour recruiters in the region. Malaysian employers do not seem to be fazed by the threat of stiff fines and they continue to hire illegal workers if they feel the risks are offset by the benefits. Supply naturally follows demand.

In August last year Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and the then Indonesian President B.J. Habibie had agreed on the need for a more orderly entry of Indonesian workers into Malaysia. They also agreed that these workers should have basic skills.

Ensuring that only the professionally mature workers engage in employment abroad should be the primary concern of countries which export labour. These countries should also undertake to apprehend illegal recruiters operating in their domain. Possession of basic education and social skills will increase the chances that these workers will be accepted by the local people.

These prerequisites will go some way to reduce the exploitation of foreign workers besides providing receiving countries with the confidence that these temporary residents will not create problems for the duration of their stay. The rascals in their midst should not be allowed to tarnish the image of the bona fide workers whose remittances help to support their families and contribute to the economic growth of their native lands.

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