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Budget-reactions (Ministers)

EVERYONE BENEFITS FROM THE BUDGET, SAY MINISTERS

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 19 (Bernama) -- Several cabinet ministers said today everyone would benefit from the Budget 2002, especially the rural population.

Information Minister Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob said he believed that the people would welcome the budget as it provided many benefits to all groups including the people in the rural areas.

"The government's focus on small and medium size projects is well balanced while not forgetting the interest of women and young people," he said when met at the Parliament here.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is also Finance Minister, presented the budget which among others provided a 10 per cent salary increase for some 900,000 civil servants and a RM59 million allocation to a special programme for women.

Khalil said the even though the government increased tax on several goods and categories, the budget would not burden the people.

Rural Development Minister Datuk Azmi Khalid meanwhile said that despite the global economic uncertainty, the government continued to be sensitive to the need of reducing the gap between the urban and rural population by providing substantial allocation for the purpose.

"In general the Budget 2002 not only gives emphasis to the trade sector but also the rural population, the less capable and the Orang Asli," he said.

He said the ministry would make a review and restructure its organisation to ensure that the allocation provided by the government benefited the grassroots.

Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik said the deserving sectors received allocation under the budget.

"All the packages and incentives go to deserving sectors such as education, health and tourism," he said.

Dr Ling hoped that the private sector and the public would make use of the tax cuts, reduction in income tax and half month bonus to stimulate the economy.

Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu, in his comments, said the high import duties on tobacco would be effective in efforts to discourage students from smoking.

He said the budget could spur economic growth for the country despite the global economic situation.

Women and Family Development Minister Datuk Shahrizat Abdul Jalil thanked the prime minister for responding to women's plight.

"We are grateful to the Prime Minister for according such respect to women especially widows by allowing them to continue to enjoy the pension of their late husbands when they re-marry," she said, describing the budget as women friendly.

Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said the RM710 million allocated for housing of armed forces personnel was greatly welcomed.

He also thanked the government for increasing the allowance of members of the territorial army as well as those with specialised skills.

Najib said the decision to give half month bonus to civil servants was a windfall.

Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng said it was a great budget for health, having a strong support in the health sector over the last few

years.

He said the RM6.8 billion allocation was an all historic high which was an indication of commitment of the government even during the economic slowdown by pumping in more money in the health sector so that nobody was neglected.

"The amount of money they give shows that the 25 hospitals and 380 clinics in the rural areas we are building in this country now will go onstream," he said.

Chua said at the same time the government ensured that public health was protected by increasing the taxes for tobacco and therefore raising the price of cigarettes in the market.

"This is something that the ministry of health is navigating. Last year it was increased and this year again it is increased in excise duties, import duties and sales tax," he said.

He said the non-government organisations (NGOs) were also well treated and the RM10 million allocated for haemodialysis centres would ensure the growing number of kidney patients get the treatment at government subsidised rates.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Tan Sri Bernard Dompok said the strategies employed in the budget took into account the nation's response to the dictate of a globalised world and the country's own capacities and limitations.

"Expansionary in nature, the budget will stimulate the economy through increase in domestic consumption as a result of measures to reduce personal income tax from 29 per cent to 28 per cent," he said.

Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir said the allocation for the tourism sector would be used to attract more tourists to Malaysia.

He said there was a need to formulate new strategies to bring in more foreign tourists in view of the anticipated decline in arrivals as a result of the Sept 11 terror attacks in the United States.

"We expect a drop in tourist arrivals in October, also in November and December although these are peak months," he said.

Kadir said the ministry also anticipated decline in tourist arrivals in January, February and March next year in the absence of no new strategies.

Youth and Sports Minister Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein said the RM81.8 million allocated for youth programme reflected government's concern to develop the group.

"The youths make up 40 per cent of the population and are the country's important assets. This group must be equipped with knowledge as bulwark against various challenges," he said.

He said the increase in allocation also reflected the aspirations and tastes of the youths today.

Hishammuddin also said he was satisfied with the budget the attention in particular to the sports development in the country.

Besides projecting a policy of sports for all, he said the achievements of the national contingent in the recent 21st SEA Games had given the government the confident to continue to provide programmes to enhance performance of the athletes.

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