

06/02/2001

Foreign workers still needed

Kalam Azad

SOME years ago, when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad spoke of the need to have a population of 70 million in Malaysia it was treated as a joke.

After all, everywhere else, the urgent need has always been for family planning.

Our population today stands at 22 million.

Now Azmi Atan (NST, Jan 30) and many like him find it unacceptable that so many foreign workers are coming to Malaysia.

There are two parts to this concern. First, the legalised entry of foreign workers and the "uncontrolled" entry of foreigners.

I am a factory worker in Johor Baru and have had foreign workers in the factory where I work for the last seven years. I sometimes wonder where all the Malaysians have gone.

Since 1991, I have made countless trips to Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang and all the districts of Johor to look for Malaysian workers - both male and female.

In 1996, I spent two days waiting at the interview centre in Kota Baru without even one applicant coming forward. Such interview sessions are preceded by advertisements in the local newspapers, radio, banners at strategic locations and sometimes even going around villages with loudspeakers.

The foreign investors put some RM200 million to set up the company and they are not likely to be sympathetic to some irritating explanation about the tight labour market. So, where have all the Malaysians gone?

Before the 1997 economic slowdown, companies in Johor Bahru were offering RM300 for workers to job hop to their factories. We still offer RM100 for every successful candidate introduced by our employee. Despite everything that has been done, including very generous benefits, it is still not possible to get enough workers to fill the vacancies available in factories and plantations.

My company recruited 442 employees in the year 2000 and 458 resigned during the same period. We are a unionised company with very generous benefits. Since 1991 the lowest bonus paid was three months (highest being five months).

The lowest basic salary for those with minimum Standard Six schooling is much higher than the lowest paid by the public sector.

The fact remains that we do not have enough Malaysians to fill the many vacancies available in the job market.

Those Malaysians available for work are not likely to change their social and personal habits and needs. It is unfortunate but we have to resort to hiring foreign workers.

The Government vis-a-vis the Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration Department have done more than enough for the entry, hiring and repatriation of foreign workers to function in an organised and controlled manner - for normally civilised societies.

But administrative procedures, however well conceived and implemented, are good only for a public that is respectful of them. The Malaysian creative enterprise often finds crooked ways to gain personal profit regardless of the consequences to the security and well being of our nation. This is particularly true with regard to the entry of foreigners to Malaysia.

Foreigners without permits are employed, immigration documents are forged and sold for profit and foreigners are assisted to come into the country without proper documents.

Having been in the military and carried out tasks of guarding our coasts against infiltration, I know it is virtually impossible to prevent such entries.

With the best will in the world, we do not have the means to stop the entry of illegals into Malaysia. Our borders are just too long and too difficult to police.

Sadly it leaves us where we started and that is, we must have these foreign workers. The question is, are they really so bad?

We had 120 Bangladeshis for six years (all have returned home) and 120 Indonesians from 1994 to 1999 and 307 from year 2000 to date. I found the Bangladeshis had difficulty communicating initially but they learn Bahasa Malaysia quickly and communication improves after one year until they were almost fluent by the time their contract expired. Twenty per cent were found to be above average employees, 40 per cent low average generally and 40 per cent lazy, stubborn and difficult to manage.

The Indonesians are without exception hard working, easy to communicate with, and willing to work overtime even on rest days and public holidays. Generally speaking they are better performers than the equivalent Malaysian employee. Both nationals do not give any industrial relations problems such as strikes, go-slow or participate in political or extremist religious activities.

Admittedly a small percentage abscond from the company and probably enter the illegal worker population. But the figure is small and everything is done to avoid such incidents.

They come and return to Indonesia using Malaysia Airlines, they spend a good portion of their income in Malaysia. They are people like us with normal needs and we cannot find fault with them if they seem to live a better lifestyle than some Malaysians as indicated by Azmi Atan; they earn the money they spend.

They are here to earn money and the money they earn is to support their families at home in Indonesia. They are not here because they love Malaysia and we should not expect them to either. However, all of them respect and admire what Malaysia has been able to achieve.

What do we do about those who enter Malaysia illegally? Not much I am afraid. We can minimise the problem but it is a physically impossible to stop them completely. Even if you fence every square inch of beach, there will be Malaysians willing to help some come in for a few ringgit.

It has been said that there are 700,000 illegal Indonesians in Malaysia. What do we do with them. I am sure the Police and Immigration Department can catch most of them if they want to but where do you house them and for how long until transport becomes available to send them home?

To the Azmi Atans of Malaysia I say there are no fears but we can do better in managing our foreign guests. We need to treat them as our brothers and sisters and help them feel welcome in this country.

They are our co-workers and contribute to our well-being as a nation. We need them as much as they need to be here to earn an honest living. We should point the finger at those Malaysians who employ or help illegals to enter this country. They are the anti-nationals.

We should help the Police and the Immigration Department in their effort to regularise, control and manage the employment of foreign workers.