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Housewives to the fore (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Housewives may be recruited to tell on profiteers under a novel Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Ministry move to monitor post-2002 Budget price hikes.

They will complement ongoing efforts by the ministry's enforcement officers who have been stretched to the limit keeping tabs on prices.

They will identify businesses which raise prices in the wake of the 10 sen hike in petrol and diesel prices and provide details to the Ministry.

For a start, a toll free telephone line will be set up in every State from Monday for the public to call in with information.

Its minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, said housewives will begin informing on profiteers if the plan, which was on the drawing board, became a reality.

"It's not that our officers are unable to do the job ... in fact they are working day and night and they have to cover a lot of places. But if there are citizens such as housewives who are willing to help us, it will be good because they go to the shops everyday.

"What we are trying to do is work out a team of volunteers ... like Charlie's Angels, to go around and check prices," he said after conducting price checks at the Carrefour Hypermarket in Wangsa Maju today.

He said the move would widen the network of people monitoring the prices of goods and augment the ministry's efforts to ensure there were no drastic price hikes following the increase in petrol and diesel prices.

Muhyiddin said it would also help the ministry's enforcement officers identify errant traders and give the public a chance to contribute. The ministry expects to open booths soon to register volunteer housewives.

These volunteers will then be expected to keep the ministry informed of traders who hike prices, through the toll free line.

"We don't want them going around with sticks to beat errant traders but we would like traders to know that every housewife that comes to their shop is an informant for the Ministry," he added.

Muhyiddin said information gathered from such volunteers would also help verify price-check exercises by the ministry's enforcement officers.

However, he added enforcement officers would verify information received before taking action against traders.

Muhyiddin felt the idea was workable and would be helpful.

The suggestion follows the Ministry's announcement on Wednesday that it will carry out price checks twice a week and submit a fortnightly report to the Cabinet on the prices of goods nationwide.

The Ministry stepped up its checks following the hike in diesel and petrol price announced by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad when tabling the 2002 Budget.

Meanwhile, initial checks by the Ministry's 700 enforcement officers nationwide showed that traders had not increased the prices of food items. Muhyiddin said each department inspected at least 30 shops per week and early reports showed that prices of goods, especially food items, had remained stable.

He said traders had informed the ministry that their suppliers had not raised the prices of goods either.