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Incapable builders must pay

CONTRACTORS who land Government projects should go down on their knees to pray for such a blessing - especially at such a time. Since they have been entrusted with the responsibility of getting the work done, finishing it ahead of schedule should be the norm rather than the exception. But for those who fail to even complete it on time, no excuse seems plausible.

For, every project that is delayed disrupts the orderly development of the Government's plans for the people. It causes hardship for the people who are meant to use the public facilities. Thus, the example of a Class A contractor in Johor who failed to complete the Mara Junior Science College in Pontian, and the non-completion of two other similar projects must be taken seriously. The failure to complete the college has inconvenienced the students who were to study there, their families and teachers. It has also jeopardised plans to buy equipment for the college.

Rightly, the Government has identified more than 700 contractors who have failed to deliver the projects assigned to them under the Seventh Malaysia Plan. Entrepreneur Development Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Nazri Aziz said on Thursday that they are likely to be blacklisted. Indeed, the shirkers have to pay the penalty. Warnings to speed up projects need not be even issued in the first place, for those tasked with the job should not even think of shirking their responsibility. For every project given to them, another contractor queuing in line is deprived of the job.

If the lucky builders have too much on their plates, they have to subcontract the job to others. Those hobbled by cash flow woes usually complain of clients delaying payment for jobs done. When one on-going project faces a hiccup, it affects other projects. Excuses such as blaming the weather and problems with workers are passe. The professionals know very well that they have to ensure the availability of material and labour supply. It is easy to pass the buck when targets are not met as scheduled.

Similarly, the authorities responsible for awarding the projects must scrutinise the track record and capability of candidates vying for the bid. They are as much to be blamed for the inability of the contractors to deliver the goods, especially when these are public projects. The episode of abandoned projects resulting from the consequences of the mid-eighties recession should have been a lesson well learnt.

The construction and property sector is often seen as the bellwether of the economy. Though construction only chipped in 3.3 per cent to the country's Gross Domestic Product last year against 4.8 per cent in 1997, it is the catalyst for a range of activities such as manufacturing, insurance, banking and transport.

Errant contractors who fail to complete public projects on schedule can derail efforts to stimulate the economy. Indeed, in May, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had directed Ministers and senior officials to personally monitor the progress of Government projects and not to rely solely on reports from subordinates. The concern is obvious especially in these lean times when the effects of the economic slowdown in the United States are telling.

The Government's pump-priming for infrastructure and socio-economic projects is to help shrug off the lethargy in the industry. Everyone involved in the implementation of development policies and projects must do his job well.

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