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Local authorities no help to Mida

R. Mohana Krishnan

I REFER to the Bernama report (NST, Jan 10) stating that the Government has approved the establishment of a Special Implementation and Co-ordination Unit under the Malaysian Industrial Development Authority (Mida).

The purpose of the unit, according to the Minister of International Trade and Industry, Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, is to enhance and strengthen Mida's role in providing support services to companies in the manufacturing and related sectors to expand and diversify their operations.

The services of the special unit are open to all local and foreign investors encountering difficulties or delays in obtaining approval for building plans or certificates of fitness.

Malaysia today is the 17th largest trading nation and manufacturing accounts for some 35 per cent of our gross domestic product and 70 per cent of our exports.

This is mostly due to the efforts of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his many trade and investment missions during the 1980s and early 1990s, and Mida's efforts.

However, it is becoming more difficult to attract foreign investors since they have a wider choice and we are more selective in the type of investments we want.

We continue to remain an attractive place for investors but we have become a more expensive place to do business.

I, therefore, find the need for Mida to set up the special unit disconcerting. I am surprised that Mida may need to intervene with the local authorities on behalf of investors. Local government management has not moved in tandem with the rest of the country. I have often wondered why this is so, since we have the framework for its management.

We have the National Council for Local Government established under Article 95A of the Federal Constitution for the promotion, development and control of local governments throughout the federation and for the administration of any laws relating thereto.

Moreover, the Federal and State Governments are required to follow the policies formulated by the council.

At the Federal level, we have a minister responsible for local government, and appropriately, housing. Each State in peninsula Malaysia has an executive councillor for local government, while Sabah and Sarawak have a State Minister responsible for this portfolio.

Yet, despite this leadership, the services offered by local authorities seem to be wanting and financial management poor.

Local authorities are not accountable to the ratepayers since their councillors are not elected to office but surely they are accountable to their respective State Governments.

I believe State Governments have already required local authorities to streamline and make transparent their approval processes for licensing and building to prevent any abuse by officials.

Accordingly, I wonder why is there still a general perception amongst ratepayers that there is a lack of transparency, discipline and common sense amongst some local authorities?

Meanwhile, it is my hope Mida's efforts to attract foreign capital investments to Malaysia will not be hampered by the poor service provided

by any local authorities.