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Malaysian consumers will have to stand up and fight for their rights

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HAPPY World Consumer Rights Day.

However, it can't be a happy day for the many consumers who have complaints about a host of problems in getting reliable goods and satisfactory service.

Indeed, it has been recorded that there are such complaints each day.

Somewhere, a housewife grits her teeth as taps run dry and coffee-shop owners simmer as the food in the refrigerator goes bad when there is no electricity.

There seems no end to the complaints. Have consumer problems been neglected? The answer is yes and no.

There is no lack of champions of consumer rights. Malaysians are fortunate to have a pro-consumer government.

When Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad announced the establishment of the new ministry 10 years ago for consumer affairs says it all.

There is also the Consumer Protection Act which has provision for a National Consumer Advisory Council and a Tribunal for Consumer Claims.

There are also a number of consumer organisations in the country. Malaysia is said to have more consumer associations in proportion to its population than any other country in Asia.

For a population of nearly 23 million, it has 15 consumer groups as well as Fomca, the umbrella body for 11 state associations,

Moreover, there are 28 consumer-oriented legislations.

What can be lacking?

Pahang Association of Consumers President Bishan Singh Bahadur pointed out that one of the association's weaknesses was its inability to provide alternatives. He said the movement tells people what to do or what not to do but is unable to provide them with alternatives.

That's partly because of lack of financial resources to come up with the alternatives. Without independent resources, compromises are often made to get grants from donors, governments and consumers.

"Consumer apathy will continue to persist and without adequate resources, expertise and power. It is a losing game."

This aside, the success or effectiveness of consumer movements is also greatly dependent on the active participation of consumers to enable the associations to function as an influential body.

In the end, the best form of consumer protection is the consumer's awareness of his rights and the need to speak up and lodge complaints, and when necessary, to demand compensation.

Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said although consumer awareness has reached a respectable level, there is still a lack of interest among the public in protecting their rights as consumers.

Harnessing consumer power, said Muhyiddin, will ensure that their rights are protected.

Muhyiddin said the public does not seem to realise the power it wields.

"If the consumers decide to boycott a product, they could really hurt the manufacturer. But more often than not, they do not use this power in a unified fashion."

Here, many expect the associations or the Ministry to fight for their rights, not realising that success depends on the participation of every

consumer.

In most cases, consumers prefer to suffer in silence. As a result, traders and manufacturers profit from their indifference, and ignorance.

"It is time Malaysians woke up to their buying power."

Bishan said the consumer movement has three significant roles to play in the new millennium.

The first is the traditional role of working as an integral part of the existing economic model to ensure that it is fair, just, accountable and responsible.

Second is to play the role of "non-partisan political watchdog" and promote participatory democracy, transparent governance and accountable administration.

The third is the pro-active role of transforming, changing and institutionalising a development approach.

Fomca president Professor Hamdan Adnan said consumer education must be carried out systematically and effectively.

"Consumer illiteracy is still widespread in not only the rural but also the urban areas."

There are many challenges ahead for consumers. They must be wary of technological developments. Today's trade malpractices come in sophisticated disguises.

Inferior products are not easily detected and thus there is a very real danger of turning developing countries into a dumping ground for goods rejected by the developed countries.

So consumers, stand up and exercise your rights.