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Ministry of Defence doing its part to improve housing for soldiers

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MANY articles have been written on the art of undermining democracy and inciting feelings against the Government.

One such article, "Housing warriors", appeared in the NST on April 1.

Such an editorial, which normally indicates the newspaper's stance on issues of the day, implies that the Government, namely the Ministry of Defence, does not care about the housing conditions of our soldiers, serving or otherwise.

Another article with similar content appeared in Utusan Malaysia on March 28, written by a columnist Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad.

In that column the writer cast aspersions and doubt on the Government's ability and commitment to provide our soldiers housing. It sounds as if the writer was trying to incite the soldiers, serving or retired, against the Government.

I wish now to comment on the NST's editorial.

According to the statistics kept by the Ministry of Defence, 126,879 members of the armed forces retired between 1968 and 2000.

On checking with the Ex-Servicemen's Association of Malaysia (PBTM), it was discovered that only 18,216 registered ex-servicemen reside permanently in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur, 12,027 in Johor and 16,720 in Penang.

In Johor Baru, out of 4,191 ex-servicemen that reside in urban areas, only 429 live in squatter settlements.

Although it is difficult for the Ministry of Defence to get the exact figures on how many ex-servicemen live in squatter settlements throughout the country, including the Federal Territory, I am sure the numbers are not half-a-million as stated in the editorial.

I am sure that the Ministry of Defence is doing its best to look after the welfare of the servicemen, and this includes providing proper housing for them.

But, common sense dictates that any effort to provide housing for the servicemen, serving or otherwise, will depend largely on the Government's financial ability to do so, especially so under the present circumstances.

Having said that, under the Fifth Malaysia Plan (1986-1990), the Government spent RM329 million to build 2,248 housing units for the servicemen.

Between 1990 and 2000, it built 7,799 units at a cost of RM620 million in 22 locations throughout the country.

Thus far, the biggest housing development for servicemen is the Desa Tun Hussein Onn project in Kuala Lumpur with 2,002 units built at the cost of RM170.99 million.

At the same time, the Government built 1,798 housing units in Butterworth and Damansara under its privatisation schemes. Of these, 1,521 units are in Damansara.

Currently, while certain quarters are busy casting doubts over the Government's ability to cater to the needs of our soldiers, 3,473 housing units are quietly being constructed and are scheduled to be completed by the end of the year.

It is mind boggling that no one has bothered to check, if at all he or she is genuinely interested in the truth.

Besides that, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad also announced recently that an additional 6,963 housing units, at a cost of

RM1.5 billion, would be constructed in the Klang Valley, where some half-a-million ex-servicemen are purportedly living in squalor. Also, under the Eighth Malaysia Plan the Ministry of Defence has recommended the building of an additional 7,974 housing units for servicemen at 42 locations throughout the country, including in big cities.

The reason some people have for so long had the perception that there is under-investment in housing for the nation's soldiers is that in their overzealousness to condemn and to destroy they simply refuse to see the wood for the trees.

If we are sincere in seeking the truth, then we have to have an open mind. Facts and figures are there to be skimmed through for a clearer picture. But then, it is easier to malign under the guise of professionalism, and to discover later that mistakes have been made. By that time it may be too late.

For those who think that the Government is in the habit of neglecting members of the armed forces, they should think more than twice about the consequences that may befall the country's well being.

Criticism of any ministry by any member of the media in the country, without first checking the facts and figures is tantamount to undermining the workings of the Government, which is now under great pressure to perform well for its citizenry.

I am a critical reader. I am just sick and tired of seeing news bloopers get printed. By then it is usually too late to do anything about it. I hope that the message here is well received by critics, social and political commentators everywhere that they must check the facts and figures before they embark on their diatribe.