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MTUC picket will taint Malaysia's image: Fong

Hamisah Hamid

THE Malaysian Trades Union Congress's (MTUC) nationwide picket will taint Malaysia's image when labour ministers from the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) gather in Kuala Lumpur for the Asean Labour Ministers Meeting next month.

Human Resources Minister Datuk Dr Fong Chan Onn said the picket, which is supposed to be held at the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) offices on May 12, will also coincide with the 2001 Workers' Day celebration.

"We need to uphold the image and the pride of the country. We have a harmonious industrial relations here and we don't want Asean labour ministers to have a different picture of Malaysia because of the picket," Fong told a news conference after chairing the ministry's weekly post-Cabinet meeting in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

The Asean Labour Ministers Meeting is scheduled to take place at Mandarin Oriental Hotel from May 9 to 11. All the ministers are invited to attend the Workers' Day celebration at Bukit Jalil the following day. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is expected to officiate at the annual gathering.

Fong said the MTUC is fully aware of the event as the Congress is part of the celebration's organising committee. The minister has a strong reason to be upset with MTUC's picket threat.

According to him, it was not easy for the Government to be the host for the Asean Labour Ministers Meeting as other countries in the region were also bidding to be the host.

"We have to compete with other Asean countries such as Laos... and we want to show them industrial harmony in this country," he said.

He said the tripartite cooperation between the union, the Government and employers is especially important now when the country is facing the impact from the US economic slowdown.

"The three parties have to work together to ensure our economic fundamentals are not affected by the slowdown," he said.

The ministry, on its part, has set up a taskforce to monitor retrenchments following the closure of companies affected by the softening US economy.

Asked to confirm whether the Opposition has instigated the MTUC to picket, he said, "I don't want to speculate."

He, however, acknowledged that he had recently heard that the Opposition wanted the MTUC to go ahead with the picket.

"I hope they (MTUC) are not influenced by it. Confrontation will not solve any problem," he added.

Fong said the Government had earlier agreed with the MTUC's proposed National Retrenchment Fund despite facing resistance from employers.

The fund now is awaiting approval from employers before it is implemented.

"It shows that the Government is willing to work with the MTUC. So, we hope the MTUC can support us now," he said.

Extending his appeal for the second time this week for the MTUC to call off its picket, Fong said it is best for the union to resolve any problem at a discussion table rather than taking it to the street.

He said the Government has always regarded the MTUC as a partner and all worker-related problems could be settled through the tripartite meeting involving the Government, the unions and the employers.

"Although issues related to the EPF are not under the ministry's jurisdiction, we are prepared to listen to the workers' woes.

"We can suggest appropriate channels for the MTUC to voice out their grievances (on EPF)," he said, adding that the ministry's secretary-general Datuk Dr Syed Muhamad Syed Abdul Kadir will contact MTUC for a meeting.

The 800,000-strong MTUC is organising a picket to express their dissatisfaction over the 2-per cent cut from 11 per cent workers' EPF contribution and the 6 per cent dividend for 2000, the lowest dividend announced by EPF since 1975.

The Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Services (Cuepacs) does not support MTUC's militant approach to the matter and had advised its private sector union to reconsider its decision.

The MTUC general council, which will meet on April 20, will have a final say on the picket plan.

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