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Protecting the innocent from abuse and exploitation

KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Every child has the right to grow up in a safe and nurturing environment, and rely on adults for protection and guidance.

When adults harm and exploit children, it is the worst case of betrayal of trust as a child should never be subjected to harm, whether in the home, schools, streets or workplace.

According to the Global Movement for Children, children all over the world are being harmed every day and an estimated 250 million children between the ages of five and 14 are working in developing countries.

Roughly 60 million children are exploited in the worst forms of child labour and some 120 million work full-time, many for nine or more hours a day.

Almost 80 per cent of them earn no money at all for their labour.

The Movement said none was able to attend school while another one million were lured into the multi-billion dollar commercial sex trade every year.

The children are coerced, "bonded" by debt, sold or simply kidnapped.

Child labour and exploitation are not only the result of poverty, they also perpetuate poverty.

Without education, many children find themselves without better opportunities later in life.

Many, in turn, will look to their own children to help supplement the family's income and many more children will suffer from injuries or contract diseases that will leave them permanently unable to work.

The Movement also calls for action now to end dangerous child labour and exploitation, and prove ourselves worthy of the trust children place in adults.

As part of the efforts towards ensuring that Malaysia is free from child labour, the National Unity and Social Development Ministry will launch a campaign called "Say Yes for Children" on Sept 1.

To be launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the campaign will look at ways to create a conducive and enabling environment for children to grow up, and is built on 10 imperative actions and responsibilities.

These are:

- * leave no child out,
- * put children first,
- * care for every child,
- * fight HIV/AIDS,
- * stop harming and exploiting children,
- * listen to children,
- * educate every child,
- * protect children from war,
- * protect the earth for children, and
- * fight poverty and invest in children.

The campaign is also part of the Movement's broad-based efforts to ensure greater action for children and to hold governments accountable in the run-up to and after the United Nations Special Session on Children, to be held from Sept 19 to 21, in New York.

The Movement is a group of people and organisations around the world dedicated to promoting the rights of the child.

National Unity and Social Development Minister Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah

Sulaiman said although the problem of child labour was not too serious in Malaysia when compared to some countries, children, nevertheless, needed to be protected from it.

"They are the country's future and for them to become good citizens, we need to nurture them from young."

She added that children also needed to be protected from all forms of harm and exploitation, including sexual, as it was important to ensure proper development for the young.

"The campaign will look at the current level of protection children have, and how they can be further protected.

"To do this, we need to look at people's attitude and sensitivity towards children, and also the legislation in place to protect them."

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