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Volunteerism is every citizen's responsibility

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IT is most gratifying to note that the spirit of volunteerism was a major contributory factor in the success of the 2001 Telekom Malaysia Le Tour de Langkawi cycle racing held in February.

At a function to show appreciation, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad paid glowing tributes to 10,000-odd volunteers who kept virtually clean the entire racing route area nationwide during the week-long event (NST, April 23).

The Prime Minister was so impressed by the services of the volunteers, that he called on Malaysians to nurture the culture of volunteerism for the greater benefit of the people and the nation.

The Prime Minister's call is timely and deserves the serious consideration of all Malaysians. Everyone, from school children to retirees, can, in one way or other, contribute to the common good, through the true spirit of volunteerism.

Such an act of benevolence need not come necessarily only from the affluent or the blessed in society. This social responsibility rests squarely on the shoulders of every citizen.

In launching the International Year of Volunteers 2001 in New York in New York on Nov 28, 2000, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan said: "At the heart of volunteerism are the ideals of service and solidarity and the belief that together we can make the world better ... Volunteers do not seek to impose their values, their ideas or their agendas.

"Rather they find out what people need and want, and they work with them to make it happen. Evidence is growing that societies with high levels of civic engagement have a lower level of communal strife."

Let us do something for the betterment of society. There is a wide spectrum of activities to choose from, depending on one's interests, skills, talents or resources.

These include tree planting, nursing care, skills transfer, counselling, help raising funds for worthy causes, assisting public libraries, hospitals, schools and orphanages through various programmes and projects, etc.

However, it must be noted that whether one wants to help the displaced in a war-torn country or the disabled in a local institution, there must be a sense of commitment and dedication on the part of the volunteer.

Volunteerism should be perceived as the driving force of humanism that can be developed and harnessed to complement the Government's social initiatives.

It provides a steady and continuous source of manpower with a variety of skills capable of making significant contribution to the vulnerable and the disadvantaged. Its potential has hitherto been largely undervalued or overlooked.

The International Year of Volunteers 2001 was launched in Malaysia by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi on March 10.

After that ceremony, little did we hear of the campaign to promote volunteerism in a big way. Perhaps the print and the electronic media should also play its part in instilling greater awareness amongst the people of the need to cultivate a tradition of community service, through volunteer activities.