

01/08/2002

Builders hope for miracle

Rachael Philip

MASTER Builders Association Malaysia (MBAM) expects to see some work disruption at construction sites this month as contractors try to replace illegal workers sent home under new Immigration laws that take effect today.

MBAM vice-president Patrick Wong said it will take at least two weeks for contractors to know if their applications for foreign workers have been approved or rejected.

This faster approval is possible with the recent introduction of a green lane for foreign worker applications. The approval process used to take between four and six weeks.

Once approved, the workers will have to be brought into the country and trained before they start work at the sites.

It is during this transition period, Wong said, that work at some construction sites may slow down or even come to a halt.

"The procedure usually takes between four and six weeks. We have been promised a shorter time. We are hoping it would mean between two and three weeks," Wong said yesterday.

"We have taken down the contact numbers of our workers (sent back) as we are hoping for a miracle," he said, referring to reports that Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri will bring up the issue when she meets Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad during his visit to Bali next week.

"The green lane does offer some form of solution. Before, it was tedious and time consuming for individual contractors to apply for permits for their workers. But now, applications will be submitted to the ministry collectively on behalf of the contractors," Wong said.

MBAM has formed a secretariat to receive permit applications from industry players, which will be submitted to the authorities.

According to Wong, the first batch of "tens of thousands" of applications were submitted on Monday.

On why contractors are only rushing now to apply for permits, he said that they could not have met the deadline as the amnesty was only granted three months ago.

"Contractors were also hesitant to apply as there were many uncertainties at that time. They were also hesitant because of the ban imposed on hiring Indonesians as construction workers," he added.

The Immigration Act (Amendment) 2002 imposes stiffer penalties on illegal immigrants as well as employers harbouring illegals. These include a jail sentence, fine or whipping.

The amnesty period, from March 21 to July 31, was to allow an estimated two million immigrants who were either illegals or those who have overstayed to leave the country without being prosecuted.

The only exceptions are for those still awaiting their papers, who have a two-week grace period, and those who have purchased tickets for home valid in the first two weeks of August.