

03 DEC 2002

Feature-Disability

REASONS GETTING FEWER WHY DISABLED CAN'T LEAD INDEPENDENT LIVES

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KUALA LUMPUR: "For a normal person, getting a job is a matter-of-fact thing but for a disabled person, it is a very meaningful award," so said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in a campaign to rouse the public to assist these less fortunate people.

These words are now enshrined by those whose task is to help the disabled lead meaningful lives. They also used this statement to gauge how much success they have had with the disabled people and how much they had erased from society the prejudices and discrimination against this group of unfortunate mortals.

The Director-General of the Social Welfare Department (JKMM) Datuk Sayed A. Rahman Sayed Mohd is confident of their moves being in the right direction, saying that the government is aware of the latest developments to assist the disabled people, not to mention the international instruments pioneered by the United Nations, the International Labour Organisation and the likes.

Malaysia, he said, has signed the Proclamation on the Equalisation of Opportunities For People With Disabilities in the Asia and Pacific Region on May 16, 1994.

Since then, the government is committed to achieve the 107 targets set out in the "Agenda For Action For the Asia and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons" which are also the World Programme of Action in the Asia-Pacific region.

#### REGISTER FIRST

Sayed A.Rahman said various policies and programmes had been drawn up and implemented to help disabled people lead normal lives but the first step for parents is to register them so that the department knows where they are, their disability and age.

"The information will enable us to plan the supporting services and the programmes to train, rehabilitate or treat them," he said.

Upto June 2002, a total of 107,831 disabled people had registered with the department. Malaysia is estimated to have 220,000 disabled, based on the UN projection of one percent disabled people in any society.

This means that many disabled had not been registered and among the reasons is that the parent are too embarassed over their handicapped child that they kept them in the home.

Then, there are those in the rural areas who are ignorant or who have difficulties in registering their children in the towns or cities.

In this connection, Sayed A.Rahman advised parents to think positively and to register their disabled children so that they are not left out of the programmes and services tailored to assist them.

Among the programmes are special schools to meet their rights to education, he said, adding that his department has made the registration easy and simple. It is also prepared to send its officers to their homes.

He said they have various forms of financial aid like allowance for disabled workers (RM200 per month) and on-the-job training allowance (RM80 a month) for them to meet their daily expenses.

#### PRIVILEGES AND FACILITIES

Apart from the department, disabled people also received various privileges and facilities from the other ministries.

The Education Ministry, through its Special Education Department, provides special schools for students who are visually-impaired or deaf, intergration programmes for those with learning disability and special inclusive programmes to enable disabled students to fit into mainstream society.

The government itself has given tax rebates since 1982 to employers who took in disabled workers and in 1991, parents with disabled children under 18 were also given certain tax exemption.

The Immigration Department also exempts all fees for processing and issuing travel documents to disabled people, and the Health Ministry has come out with a comprehensive health programme, including diet, to alleviate their disabilities.

On its part, the Ministry of National Unity and Social Development provides grants for capital for the disabled people to start their own business.

The committee to encourage disabled people to work, set by the Human Resources Ministry, had registered 4,017 disabled job-seekers from 1990 to 2001 and found work for 2,592 of them in that period.

The Housing Ministry had issued a guideline to developers to provide more facilities for disabled people.

In terms of travel, Malaysia Airlines System (MAS) gives them 50 percent discount for fares in the country, similar to the discounts given by Keretapi Tanah Melayu, bus company Transnasional and PUTRA-LRT.

For accomodation, the Kuala Lumpur Cityhall (DBKL) charges them a lower rental rate for its low-cost housing and flats.

#### COMMUNITY REHABILITATION CENTRES

Sayed A.Rahman said the government also provides an allocation of RM4.2 million a year to run the 259 Community Rehabilitation Centres for 5,768 disabled children and 520 staffers in the country.

Management grants totalling RM3.077 millions were also given out to 83 voluntary organisations for disabled people, apart from a per capita grant of RM686,751 to 42 of these voluntary organisations and RM2.6 million to 27 special schools.

Last February, an Islamic insurance scheme was launched to provide coverage for disabled people which meant that they too have economic values in society.

The insurance scheme, a joint effort by JKMM and Syarikat Takaful Malaysia, offers five schemes of coverage including a compensation of RM4,000 to RM15,000 for death in accidents and from RM2,000 to RM10,000 for death.

For permanent disability due to accidents, the scheme offers a coverage of RM2,000 to RM5,000 besides medical care and funeral expenses of RM500.

#### CONTRIBUTION OF DISABLED PEOPLE

In terms of work, Sayed A.Rahman said JKMM is not demanding a lot from the employers except simple jobs for these disabled people to be independent.

"They are not asking for sympathy but opportunities so that they can live independently and play a role in the development of society.

"They just want to be regarded as useful and productive citizens of the country," he added.

At present, 4,490 disabled people are working in the private sector. Of the total, 645 are visually handicapped, 1,597 with hearing impairment, 1,956 with physical deformities and 292 with mental disability.

The government has provided jobs to 446 of these people from the professional to the supporting level.

In the academia, a few of them are lecturers and are acknowledged for their expertise in areas like economy, law, history and technology.

They had also done the nation proud with their gold, silver and bronze medals in international sporting arena like Sukan Paralimpiad Malaysia 2002 and the Commonwealth Games 2002 in Manchester, England, recently.

To bridge their digital divide, PDKNET, a portal for disabled people would be established for them to link up and interact with each other and the outside world.

The portal would also have information on job vacancies and facilities, in line with the government's policy of enhancing knowledge and involvement in business or the K-economy.

In short, the reasons why disabled people in the country could not lead useful or fruitful lives, except those with serious handicaps, are getting fewer. -- Bernama

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