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Foreign labour biting the hand that feeds them

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MALAYSIAN businessmen and entrepreneurs abroad have often been advised and reminded by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that they should behave, respect and abide by the rules of the country in which they work and operate.

He had stressed that they should not run foul of local laws, and if they did they would have to face the consequences and be subjected to the laws of the land. The Malaysian authorities would not interfere in such instances but would leave it to the host country to take the appropriate action.

As guests in another country, Malaysians must be on their best behaviour.

They should do their country proud by being model citizens - it does not matter whether they are there to work or on holiday.

The same goes for citizens of other countries and guests in Malaysia. When they violate the law and destroy property, they must be prepared to face the consequences.

Malaysia, with its economic growth and development, has been a magnet for foreign workers. By some estimates, there are about two million foreign workers or guest workers in the country. The rapid growth in Malaysia resulted in labour shortages, and the Government had to look to foreign workers as Malaysians themselves are not prepared to do the manual jobs nor work in the estates.

Much of the foreign direct investment in the early and mid-1980s were attracted to Malaysia by the relatively cheap, well-trained and well, educated labour force. But the country does not offer cheap labour any more.

There are other countries in the region that offer much cheaper labour and it is difficult for Malaysia to compete with them in this category.

But the higher standard of living and the availability of jobs in the country has attracted foreign labour. The availability of jobs has attracted the migrant workers like ants to sugar. This could well be described as the new wave of migrant labour. The British had imported migrant labour to work in the plantations, tin mines and even in the police force.

But there has also been the push factor in neighbouring countries for the guest workers to make their way to Malaysia. The poor economic conditions in many countries and the lack of employment opportunities in their native countries, especially Indonesia, had led them to Malaysia.

Many of them had risked lives, to be smuggled across rough seas and international waters under cover of darkness to make it to Malaysian shores. Some never made it as the boats were in poor condition while others were intercepted by the Malaysian naval police.

Even though Malaysia has invited foreign workers to seek a living in this country and at the same time help with its development, it does not give them the right to misbehave, break the law, riot, destroy property and disrupt the much treasured peace in this country.

Malaysians have "tolerated" the many petty thefts that foreign workers, and especially the Indonesians, have been responsible for. Malaysians have also had to put up with the rude and unruly behaviour of their guests. Malaysia's laws must be respected, not only by Malaysians but by its visitors and guests.

The crimes committed by them are increasingly becoming more violent. Last year, Indonesians topped the list. Of the 2,169 crimes committed, 1,052 were violent, including murders and rape.

Some areas in the country have been taken over by the Indonesians - they have set up their own settlements and Malaysians themselves have been "driven out" of some areas which have become Indonesian enclaves. Malaysians have tolerated and indeed have been patient with the guests.

Every effort has been made to ensure that the needs of legal workers are taken care of. The banks have infact made special arrangements to enable the guest workers to repatriate funds back home to their families. The outflow of funds from the country as a result of these repatriation is quite substantial.

But Malaysia's tolerance and hospitality has been taken for granted and the guests are beginning to take the law into their own hands. Malaysia had not only welcomed them as guests and offered them opportunities to earn a living but they seem to be biting the hand that feeds them.

Enough is enough and the Government has decided that the problem must be dealt with. And rightly so. Malaysians value and treasure their peace and no one should destroy it. The irresponsible behaviour of Indonesian workers at the Hualon factory in Nilai has prompted the authorities to take drastic action - to look to other countries for labour. Malaysia will now look to Vietnam, Cambodia and Sri Lanka for its labour requirements.

Those on the losing end are the Indonesian workers themselves. They have not only jeopardised their own chance of earning a decent living but have shut the door for others from their homeland. But even as the Government deports the illegals and the trouble makers, others are still risking limb and life to come to Malaysia's shores in search of work.

While Malaysia looks to other countries to fill the labour requirements, and especially in the non-skilled and semi-skilled sectors, it is important that all options for solving labour requirements are considered and explored. The country cannot, and should not, be held to ransom by foreign workers who are not grateful, do not behave and create problems and destroy property in their guests' home.

Malaysians must make an effort to ensure that the country's development and progress is not jeopardised by their own lack of interest in the jobs available and by being too choosy.

The various authorities, including the private sector and employers, must ensure that the innocents are not victimised nor the rights of workers violated. Action against those who break the law, illegal workers and employers who employ illegals, must be taken so that a clear message is sent.

It is important that Malaysia review its foreign labour policy, ensure that there is strict adherence to the intent and spirit of the policy and that it is not open to abuse. Those who violate and abuse it must be held responsible and dealt with in accordance with the law.

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