

12 DEC 2002

Yearender-Labour

MODERATE YEAR FOR LABOUR BUT COUNTRY'S STABLE & PEACEFUL

By: S. Retna

KUALA LUMPUR: Harsher penalties for illegal workers, imposition of stricter laws for intake of foreign labour, introduction of the Malaysian Renumeration Scheme and the highest bonus payout for civil servants in six years were the major highlights of the manpower sector in the country in 2002.

The year started off with a bang when the government, in an effort to stem illegal immigrants from causing numerous social problems here, proposed that canning and a stiffer jail sentence be imposed on those who enter the country to find work.

This was done through the amendment of the Immigrant Act passed by Parliament which came into effect on Aug 1.

The law was also necessitated by problems caused by illegal immigrants which had reached a serious magnitude to the extent of posing a threat to national security.

Prior to enforcing the law, hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants were sent back home under an amnesty programme announced by the government.

During the amnesty period, some 468,000 illegal immigrants voluntarily returned and almost half of these were Indonesians employed in the construction industry.

#### G-TO-G PACT

The government also decided that from this year foreign labour would only be allowed through government-to-government agreements, in an effort to keep tabs of the foreign workforce while they were employed in Malaysia. Malaysia hoped to sign such agreements with some 10 countries next year.

To facilitate the implementation of the agreements, the government also announced the setting up of a foreign labour exchange which would be up and running by mid-2003.

Once an agreement was signed with a particular country, workers from that country would be allowed to work in Malaysia with certain conditions, among which was that they were proficient either in Bahasa Melayu or English and they were skilled.

Among the countries the government wanted to "import" labour from are Nepal, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, India, Uzbekistan, Cambodia, the Philippines and Laos.

#### NEW SALARY SCHEME FOR CIVIL SERVANTS

On the local front, the government scrapped the New Renumeration Scheme (NRS) for civil servants and replaced it with the Malaysian Renumeration Scheme (MRS), which the public sector umbrella union, Cuepacs, lauded as a major step forward in industrial relations in the country.

The union, which protects nearly a million public sector employees, hailed the new salary scheme, which would be based on work efficiency and knowledge.

According to reports most of the government servants had opted for the new scheme by the dateline Nov 1.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, when announcing the new scheme in August, said that the MRS was not an overall salary review but an improvement of the existing NRS.

Cuepacs called the new scheme a mark of a new era in the civil service as the potential-and-ability based salary increment would spur civil

servants to work harder.

The government also handed out a one-month bonus to the civil sector, which was the highest payout to the sector in the last six years. The payout was announced by Dr Mahathir while tabling the 2003 National Budget.

This was seen by civil service unions as a move by the government to show its appreciation to the civil servants for their work which had transformed the way government offices operate.

#### MTUC FAILED TO ACHIEVE OBJECTIVES

The private sector, however, was a letdown this year with none of the long-standing labour issues resolved.

The Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC), the largest private sector umbrella union, had been fighting for a minimum wage of RM900 for private sector workers and a fixed salary for all plantation workers. None of these objectives were achieved this year.

The only significant change worth mentioning was the pending shift in leadership of the umbrella union, when its president of 17 years, Senator Zainal Rampak, announced that he would vacate his position on Dec 31, this year to pave the way for his deputy, Mohamad Shafie B.P. Mammal, to take charge.

This agreement was reached during the run-up to the MTUC polls early in the year but it is still unclear if Zainal would keep his promise.

Zainal and Mohamad Shafie made the agreement public in March, just two days before the MTUC was to go to polls to pick its top leaders.

Mohamad Shafie was initially nominated for the presidency to take on Zainal but after reaching the pact the former withdrew his nomination hoping to take over the helm of the MTUC from Jan 1, 2003.

It was also heartening to note that Zainal, who is a veteran trade unionist, was elected for the fourth consecutive three-year term as one of the four vice-presidents of the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) governing body.

Zainal, who had served on the labour governing body as a deputy member since 1993, was elevated as titular (full) member in 1999.

All said, the country and people had benefited for the labour harmony which prevailed throughout the year, contributing directly to the recovering economy and political stability that is the envy of many other countries. -- BERNAMA

SR LDB KGO