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Most teenagers welcome National Service stint

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Teenagers are looking forward to picking up new skills when they get drafted into National Service in 2004.

In a YouthQuake survey involving 148 teenagers aged between 15 and 16, 80 welcomed the programme.

Among the things they hope to learn are self defence, survival skills, first aid, cooking, how to do community work and interact with each other better.

This group, which included boys and girls from all over the country, was also keen to experience military training, saying that it could, among other things, help instil discipline and increase their confidence.

"The NS period will be time well spent. The new environment will help us think about what to do after the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia. It will toughen and equip us to face the challenges ahead," said Woon Hon Win, 16.

Echoing Woon's view was Oliver Chua, 16, from Kepong, who hopes to pick up survival skills that would help him know what to do, should there be a national emergency.

"If a crisis were to happen suddenly, I would know how to react, how to deal with the situation and help my family and others," he said.

Syhabudin Tajolludin, 15, from Teluk Pulai, Klang, said that the training would also equip him with the knowledge of how best to protect and defend his family in the event of war.

Although clearly excited about the NS, Syhabudin would like more details to be revealed. "Perhaps a roadshow could be held to explain to us what we will be in for," he suggested.

On Wednesday, the Cabinet Committee on National Service proposed that all young people who reach the age of 18 in 2004 must undergo the NS. Failure to do so would result in a punishment yet to be determined.

The NS, aimed at fostering patriotism, unity and national integration, was proposed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak is chairman of the Cabinet Committee.

On the subject of the NS being compulsory for girls, Adliah Jamil, 16, a shop assistant at Central Market, said she was all for it.

"Girls should definitely join the NS. We should think of it as free self-defence classes," she said.

The survey showed that 42 per cent of the girls interviewed were all for the NS.

Ng Wai Kien, 16, of Chemor, Perak, said that the NS was good for girls because "they were usually considered weak".

"We need to prove ourselves. Anything a boy can do a girl can do just as well," she said, adding that this would provide the perfect opportunity to show the men what women are made of.

Also in support of the call for girls to be drafted was Mohd Hafiz Mohd Idris, 16, from Ipoh.

"In all aspects, I believe girls should enjoy the same opportunities as their male friends. That's what equality is about and I think that is what the girls want," he said.

Lee Pei Ying, 16, from Bangsar, however, was worried that she would not hold up to the possible rigid regimented programme in the NS, preferring to concentrate on her studies instead.

To curb NS evaders, Adliah suggested withholding SPM examination results. "They won't be able to secure good jobs, or further their

studies," she said.

Other suggestions included imposing a jail term equivalent to the duration of the service or a fine of RM1,500, blacklisting evaders from scholarships, withholding drivers' licence and even having all evaders do community work.

On the other end of the scale was Amirul Feisal Shahrudin, 16, from Kelana Jaya, who felt that 18 was too late to begin disciplining teens.

"Once the six months is over, they might regress, and nothing would have been achieved," he said.

The survey noted that the main concern of those who weren't keen on NS was the missed opportunity to commence studies during the designated national service period.

Like many of his peers, Mok Weng Kuin, 15, from Teluk Pulai in Klang insists that national service should be conducted voluntarily.

Yogita Prabhakar, 16, from Bangsar, offered a solution. "You can't force us to join. But if exemptions can be gained in university or when we apply for jobs in the future, I think there will be less resistance," she said.

Adding to the list of motivating factors is Soh Sook Ping, 16, from Cheras, who wants to learn more than handle firearms.

"Let us perform community service, learn how to fly a plane or drive an army tank. But to do this, six months is not enough. A minimum of two years would seem more appropriate," she said, adding that there would be a greater sense of achievement at the end of the service.

As for the NS' aim to unite the races, Jolene Lai Pei Shan, 15, from Subang Jaya said: "How do you expect us to be united and patriotic if we don't even want to be there in the first place?"

On the other hand, Thilaga Rajendran, 16, from Johor Baru thinks that the Government's aim to instil national unity would be met with this programme. "Under military conditions, I think all races will be united by a sense of patriotism," she said.

Agreeing with her was Hasmili Wari, 16, from Cheras, who became interested in the training after seeing his friend undergoing military training in Singapore. "National integration and patriotism will definitely be achieved because we are no longer talking about defending ourselves, but our country."