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National service to be compulsory (HL)

Lee Shi-Ian

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - National service, which will include military training, will be made compulsory and stiff penalties await those who ignore call-ups, Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said today.

The Cabinet has agreed to form a committee to realise Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's proposal of implementing national service to inculcate the spirit of patriotism and character-building in young Malaysians.

The committee will include Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim, Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamed, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Tan Sri Bernard Dompok, Deputy Defence Minister Datuk Shafie Apdal, and Deputy Home Ministers Datuk Zainal Abidin Zin and Datuk Chor Chee Heung.

At a Press conference at Wisma Pertahanan, Najib said for national service to be a success, participation would be made compulsory.

"The committee will meet soon to discuss and draw up legislation to ensure that participation in national service is compulsory and stiff penalties are imposed on those who ignore call-ups."

He said the national service co-curriculum would not be entirely military-based as it would include other subjects as well, which would be discussed at length by the committee.

"Those who are called up for national service will have to wear uniform. Basic equipment, the age that a person has to take part in national service and the type of training are among the topics to be discussed."

The committee will also hold discussions with groups such as student bodies and non-governmental organisations to get feedback on its implementation.

Najib said the Cabinet had not given a timeframe on when national service would begin.

He said the committee would do its best and propose a date as soon as possible.

"There is still room in our community to instil patriotism and racial integration. We want to build a strong and formidable country where the people are united."

Asked what age would be suitable for national service, Najib said preferably it would be for those who had just completed the SPM examination and were waiting for their results.

He said nothing was concrete yet as it had to be evaluated by the committee. But he added that the Government was sensitive to the concerns of the people and would try to convince them that it was in their best interests.

"For those who disagree with the idea of a national service, the Government is willing to listen to their arguments.

"Members of the public are quite apathetic when it comes to national security.

"One example is the Territorial Army which is short of manpower as some employers refuse to allow their employees time off for training," he said.

Najib said Malaysia's national service would be different from Singapore's. The committee will consider giving an allowance to those who serve in national service and exempting women from serving.

Asked about finance, Najib said the financial outlay was large but it

would not be coming from the ministry's coffers as it was a national project and required substantial funds.

On the period of training, he said it could not be too short as there would not be enough time to mould an individual.

It could not be too long either as the individual would be out of the workforce. Therefore, he said, a balance had to be struck.

Najib said the Government was worried about declining moral values among the youth and had to start instilling good values in them but added that it would not be able to solve moral and social problems.

Asked whether the implementation of national service would mean that the Rakan Muda programme had failed, Najib said the Rakan Muda was a volunteer programme unlike the national service.

On whether those who have served in national service would be called back for refresher courses and placed on active duty, Najib said it would depend on the individual.

"If the individual proves to be as good as our regulars in the army, we may put him into active duty but nothing concrete has been decided yet and the committee will discuss this later," he said.