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PM wants firms to hire disabled

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SHAH ALAM, Thurs. - Employers have been urged to open up more opportunities for the disabled by hiring them to fill positions in their companies.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir hoped people would be more aware of the potential possessed by the disabled and employers should not view their hiring as merely part of fulfilling their social responsibilities.

"The disabled should be given the chance to realise their full potential, while at the same time enjoy a more meaningful life without depending on others.

"For most people, securing jobs are taken for granted, but for one with disabilities, it is a meaningful gift. Indirectly, a job will allow them the chance to integrate and become part of society," he said, adding that companies which hired the handicapped were accorded tax incentives.

Speaking at the launch of an inaugural conference on the economic status of the disabled at Intekma Resort and Convention Centre, Dr Mahathir said besides enabling them to support themselves and their families, employment would also allow those with disabilities to prove their worth and contribute to society and the country.

Dr Mahathir said until the end of last year, 4,490 disabled people were employed by the private sector. Of the number, 645 were visually handicapped, 1,597 were deaf, 1,956 physically handicapped and 292 mentally disabled.

The Human Resources Ministry, he added, had introduced a code of practice on the hiring of disabled workers in the private sector aimed to serve as a guideline on effective registration and placement of the handicapped.

"The code of practice also aims to enhance awareness among the disabled that vast opportunities are available to them in the private sector if they are equipped with the necessary skills."

For the public sector, the Prime Minister said service circular No. 10/1998 stipulated that one per cent of job openings in the Government must be allocated to the disabled.

"Until today, the Government has offered jobs to 446 disabled persons. Among the jobs held by the handicapped range from those in the professional to support groups.

"In academics, some of them have succeeded in becoming professionals and experts in their respective fields, lecturing in law, economics, history, technology and others."

Saying that they have also charted commendable performances in the sporting arena, Dr Mahathir said this was a testimony of their abilities and proved they could, together with the rest of Malaysians, contribute towards their own development and that of the nation.

"Employers who have given them the opportunities have found them loyal, hardworking, honest, dedicated and productive."

Outlining at length the various measures that have been introduced to enhance the welfare of the handicapped, Dr Mahathir said although the percentage of those with disabilities in the country was small, the Government did not want them to be marginalised, exploited and discriminated against.

"The Government will continue to safeguard their welfare by launching various programmes through its agencies."

He said the Government was committed towards achieving the objectives and targets stipulated in the Agenda for Action for the Asia and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons for the period of 1993-2002.

"To realise our commitment, the Government will continually offer various services, including rehabilitation, education and training for the disabled. This is to enable them to be independent and to enhance their economic status."

However, the Prime Minister said the Government had limited resources and as such it had to rely on voluntary organisations or non-governmental organisations to complement its efforts.

"Until today, there are 163 registered voluntary organisations nationwide. They are supported by the Government via the provision of grants. This year, 153 organisations were given grants to run educational and training activities for the disabled."

The Prime Minister wanted more organisations to be active in the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia since most organisations were registered in the Klang Valley and west coast states.

Dr Mahathir urged the disabled to master information and communications technology to ensure they did not get left behind.

"They have been chosen as a target group under the 'bridging the digital divide' programme. Under this programme, a network will be created to enable them to interact via the computer."

He also called on parents to report disabilities in their families to government agencies.

"Parents should not be ashamed to report. Certain handicaps, with early intervention, can be treated."

The Prime Minister urged parents to register handicapped children with the Welfare Department as it would help the Government determine their numbers and plan programmes.

"Up to now, 105,300 disabled persons have been registered."

The conference, is attended by 200 disabled participants and is organised by the Disability Resource Centre and the National Association of the Disabled Malaysia.