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Rioting puts Indon workers in bad light, their future in jeopardy

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SURADI wasn't his usual talkative self yesterday. The manual worker for a small contractor doing house renovation, landscaping work and other manual odd jobs, appeared subdued. Suradi has always been a cheerful fellow and to see him keeping to himself was a bit unusual.

Before long I found out what it was that kept Suradi subdued. It was the rioting by his fellow countrymen at a textile factory in Nilai, Negri Sembilan, in the early hours of Thursday.

News of the rioting made the front pages of most local newspapers. Some 450 Indonesian workers took the law into their own hands as they protested the arrest of 16 of their colleagues for drug abuses. They overturned a police patrol car, a van and pushed a police truck down a slope. Several motorcycles were destroyed in the process while tables and chairs were hacked and broken and used as smashing tools.

The rampage lasted several hours, but was brought under control before it got out of hand. The following day, several of the rioters were produced in a Seremban court and remanded for a week. I won't be surprised if more were to be taken in for questioning.

Suradi hails from a kampung in Jakarta and news of the rioting had put his country in bad light. I had come to know Suradi for the work he did for a former neighbour. We would exchange salams and Suradi never failed to wear a smile no matter what time of the day it was.

As an employee of the small contractor, Suradi was doing landscaping work for a small office in Balakong, near Kajang. Suradi was working in an oil palm estate before he joined his new boss. Estate work was fine, but he preferred to work in an urban setting.

Suradi is hard working and is his boss's favourite. Sometimes, his boss would use him to drive the family to do their shopping. Since he is fast and friendly, he had gradually earned the trust of his boss and other family members.

But news of the rioting in the textile factory had caused him considerable embarrassment. "Itu kerja orang bodoh Boss," Suradi said when I asked him for his opinion. Only stupid people do that, the young man said, and went on to lash out at the rioters for their crime.

Suradi, like most Indonesians, is very proud of his home country even though events in the last couple of years have put the country under a lot of unwanted international scrutiny. The recent rioting is not going to do any good for the likes of Suradi and his friends.

They are even more concerned with the official comment after the incident. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad warned them that they might not be welcomed in the future. His deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who is also Home Minister and hence responsible for law and order domestically, said there would be more stringent control when hiring foreign workers in the light of Thursday's rioting.

Suradi is not at all sorry for his countrymen for the trouble they caused. He's also not at all concerned if they are jailed and then deported. He is worried that other Indonesian workers, like him, may be made to pay for the folly and irresponsible act of others.

The recent criminal acts will tarnish even further the reputation of Indonesian workers. Even the good and responsible ones will be viewed with considerable suspicion regardless of what provoked the rioting. One is often told of their clannish nature which often leads to tribal and

territorial fights.

The authorities must not compromise on the safety of others in such a situation. Suradi knows that he may even be subjected to some strict control of his movement by his employer even if they appear to like the young man.

He is not staying with scores of other Indonesian workers, since his boss had rented a flat for all his workers, which has helped him to keep away from other Indonesian workers. "Saya perlukan kerja ini Boss. Saya tidak mau pulang dengan tangan kosong atau digari (I need this job and I don't want to go home empty handed or handcuffed)," Suradi said.

I think foreign workers who cause too much trouble should just be deported once they have been found to be guilty. Allowing them to continue to work here will put all of us at risk.

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