

04 MAY 2003

Mahathir-Civil Servants

DON'T KEEP ON DEMANDING HIGHER PAY, PM TELLS CIVIL SERVANTS

KUALA LUMPUR, May 4 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who resumes work tomorrow after a two-month leave, has told civil servants not to keep on demanding higher salaries, saying this will make the country poor and the cost of living to go up.

He said civil servants should think not just about compensation or salaries, but should also think in terms of job satisfaction and their contributions to national development.

"They should also think of their contributions to make our country respected throughout the world, of their contributions towards making Malaysians proud of being Malaysians and recognised by the world for their success," he said in an exclusive interview with the latest issue of "Khidmat", the official magazine of the Malaysian civil service.

The prime minister, who will step down in October, made the remarks when asked by the magazine for "parting advice" to the country's 900,000 civil servants.

Dr Mahathir said if civil servants were successful in turning Malaysia into a country respected and recognised throughout the world, this would be reflected in better income for themselves.

"When they show pride in their work and achieve better results, the country will develop faster and become richer. A richer country will definitely mean a better income for all civil servants.

"On the other hand, if they don't work hard and are not dedicated but keep demanding for higher salaries, they may get higher salaries. But the country will become poor and the cost of living will go up. In the end, they will find that their higher salaries actually do not give them any better life or standard of living than when their salaries were lower," he said.

The prime minister also said the contribution from Malaysians to the wealth of their country was still very low, resulting in their per capita income being less than US\$4,000, compared with US\$40,000 in Switzerland and Luxembourg.

He said a higher per capita income meant the contributions by the people in these two European countries were very much higher than that of Malaysians, who should figure out how they could contribute more towards creating wealth for the country and not be dependent on foreign workers.

"If we are dependent on foreigners, it will mean an outflow of money. That in a way will reduce the wealth of our country. We become poor because others are working for us."

At its peak, Malaysia was home to an estimated one million foreign workers, mostly from Indonesia, who were largely employed in the construction and plantation sectors.

On these workers, Dr Mahathir said they might get lower wages than Malaysians but nevertheless the money that they get is Malaysian money.

"And we are not getting the full benefits from our money and our own wealth," he said.

The prime minister also shot down the idea of a five-day week for civil servants, saying Malaysia cannot afford this yet as it is still not a developed country.

For the last few years, civil servants have been enjoying holidays on the first and third Saturdays of the month, a move introduced by the government to promote, among other things, family togetherness and domestic

tourism.

"If you have a five-day week, there would still be services that have to be carried out seven days a week. This means higher wages and allowances have to be paid for those working on off-days thereby increasing costs," he said.

"Then of course, people tend to do other things on their off days, perhaps to earn a living for themselves. They are not really resting. They are not going on holidays in order to improve our domestic tourism."

He said while it was good for the people to think that they could have a much longer weekend, the government had to be careful about this.

"We cannot afford to work less. We started with one additional day and extended it to two days a month. At the moment, I think this is about right," he said.

He pointed out that in some developed countries, sometimes their people actually worked 35 hours a week but their costs had gone up.

"They become uncompetitive. And yet they feel very unhappy that their wealth is not increasing although they have more leisure," Dr Mahathir said.

On privatisation of certain government services carried out in the last several years, Dr Mahathir said this policy would be continued because besides reducing the number of government staff, it had also cut government spending, including injection of capital.

But he admitted that there had been weaknesses and some wrong approaches in the implementation of the policy.

"We have learned a lot of lessons. We know the weaknesses and some wrong approaches. I think in future, privatisation will be much more efficient and more effective," he said.

Dr Mahathir also said there was no way the government could match the earnings in the private sector for qualified personnel in critical areas, adding that such officers who remained in the civil service did so out of dedication.

"If we increase the pay in the government sector, the private sector will still be increasing even more. So we cannot compete with them," he said.

The prime minister was also asked about a handful of civil servants who support the opposition political parties and sabotage government policies.

"At the moment their numbers are small. But it is against the accepted principles of democracy. In a democratic country, the civil servants must follow the government in power, the government of the moment. Otherwise the whole system will break down.

"If the civil servants are opposed to the present government because they want another government, perhaps, when the other government comes in, then other civil servants will sabotage that government. So, there will be no effective government," he said.

But Dr Mahathir said although the number of anti-government civil servants was small at the moment, it was bound to grow big if the government adopted a tolerant attitude towards the matter, simply because in any civil service there would be any number of grouses and unhappiness.

"And this can become blown out of proportion if people are allowed to do what they like and decide not to follow the rules of a democratic system. True, it is a handful but it is not something that we can allow, because it will grow," he said.

-- BERNAMA

AU AU YBY