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Careful planning vital before start of national service

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BARELY half a year from the time Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad mooted the idea of national service for the nation's youth, the Cabinet Committee has announced that RM500 million will be spent to provide such training for 100,000 youth born in 1986, beginning February.

Beyond the fact that recruits will be selected at random because the Government cannot afford the prohibitive cost of training all 480,000 eligibles, that each stint will be for three months, that there will be several intakes a year and that the service is mandated by law with punitive measures for those who fail to heed the call-up, nothing more seems to have been finalised.

Reports indicate that the programme is intended to arrest our youth's declining patriotism, enhance racial harmony and help instil discipline.

One wonders why there is so much haste in getting the programme off the ground.

So many social programmes of lesser magnitude have been started in haste in the past without adequate planning and preparation, only to stutter and splutter in a neither-dead-nor-alive manner because of all sorts of implementation problems.

With such experiences from the past and in view of the great magnitude of the present exercise, I think it would only be prudent and wise for the authorities to ensure that everything is in order before we begin. Nothing could be more detrimental than a disastrous start to the noble exercise.

Though the incremental approach to national service is perfectly acceptable, thorough and exhaustive planning and preparation should not be short-circuited for the sake of an early start.

Among the crucial things that need to be looked into are the proper identification and selection of training venues, appropriate upgrading of amenities at these venues to support the large number of recruits, ensuring that these amenities would not collapse under the sheer size of the crowd to be catered for and standardisation of the training curriculum and modules.

There must be proper selection and training of trainers and, above all, development of the selection methodology to ensure transparency and fairness, adequate priming of our young people, their parents and the public at large to ensure understanding and acceptance of the programme, and ensuring that our young people's education is not affected.

Unless the intakes in the year are confined to those who are not pursuing their tertiary or STPM education, it is hard to see how our children's education will not be affected if they have to leave their studies for three months to do their stints and play catch-up later, while the "luckier" ones who are not chosen can continue their studies unhindered.

I would therefore like to suggest that while the authorities work on these issues, an appropriate pre-national service programme be started next year for those who will be in Form Five or who will be reaching 17 and a publicity blitz be carried out to prepare everyone for the introduction of national service, which can then start in early 2005.

By then all the necessary planning and preparation would hopefully have been completed and time would be right for a great and smooth start. In this context, the adage, "More haste, less speed" cannot be more