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### Special programme for pupils on island

Alina Simon

LANGKAWI, Tues. - While the 231 pupils of Sekolah Kebangsaan Pulau Tuba may be able to answer simple questions in English, they hesitate when it comes to more complex queries.

The children, who live on a small island about three kilometres south of the Kuah jetty in Langkawi, obviously have little exposure to English as there are no telephone lines or English newspapers.

Like most rural children, they usually get poor grades in school as they have little interest in education.

Last year, the school recorded 8.11 per cent passes in the Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR) with the best pupil getting 2As, 2Bs and 1C.

But there is still hope for them through the introduction of an English programme at their school recently, thanks to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who mooted the idea of helping pupils during a recent visit to the island.

Sponsored by the country's largest shipping agency, Halim Mazmin Berhad, it is designed to teach and encourage the pupils to learn and use English in their daily lives.

Its executive chairman, Tan Sri Halim Mohammad, said the company's subsidiary, Wilderness Centre Sdn Bhd, was working with the Education Ministry on a five-year adventure wilderness programme on the island.

The English programme will also help nurture and instil a love for education in the children.

The adventure wilderness programme, which began in March, not only promotes English usage nationwide among Forms Two and Four students, first-year trainee teachers and undergraduates but also exposes the participants to the exciting challenges outdoors.

The programme also includes a brief stint on a 500-tonne 20-year-old training vessel Reef Explorer which is permanently anchored off the island.

Halim said the 80 trainers, including 20 from New Zealand, Australia and England, would be roped in to help the students.

Through mixing and making friends with the trainers, he said the students would acquire knowledge and skills which would come in handy later in their lives.

"We also want to open their eyes to the wide range of career choices available in the maritime industry as the country needs more local youths to go for posts such as captains or engineers which are mostly taken up by foreigners," he said.

"We hope to deliver a positive message to them that a better future awaits them provided they are focused and willing to work hard."

While declining to reveal the amount of money he would be investing in the programme, Halim said he aimed to improve the pupils' performance in the school.

"Six years from now, I want to see pupils who are now in Standard One converse as easily in English as they do in Bahasa Malaysia," he said after launching the programme at the school on Saturday.

Critics may regard it as a pipe-dream but Halim is confident of achieving the goal for he had similar success in helping his alma mater, Sekolah Menengah Tengku Bariah in Kuala Terengganu.

Halim, 52, said the school was the top in Terengganu when he left after

completing Form Five in 1968 but the performance slid in the 1990s.

Four years ago, he introduced a scholarship programme and roped in retired teachers to give free tuition.

"I want to see the same thing happen on Pulau Tuba and I will muster all the resources at hand to make sure it will materialise," said Halim who set up the company with his wife Puan Sri Mazmin Noordin in 1982.

While the details are still being worked out, Halim has installed a satellite dish to provide Internet access to the school and engaged a consultant to help draw up a training programme.

"Our activities will be carried out after school, involving games and other events that will encourage the children to use English," he said.

Meanwhile, headmaster Mustafa Ahmad, who assumed the post six months ago, hoped that the programme would help pupils in their studies.

"I am grateful that people like Halim came in to help the children for they have limited exposure to the language at home and teaching them the language here at school is an uphill battle," he said.

Like many rural schools, he said, the teachers were generally new to the profession - only one has eight years of teaching experience.

"The teaching facilities in the school are limited and there are no private tuition classes on the island but we try our best by giving tuition in the evenings and at night," he added.

Although there is another primary school, SK Lubok Cempedak (withan enrolment of 100), and a secondary school, SM Langkawi, on the island, Halim said he would concentrate on SK Pulau Tuba before considering expanding its scope.