

**YOURSAY | Better pay, less stress in plantations? Easier said than done**

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**Yoursay**

YOURSAY | 'In reality, there are no takers among locals for jobs in plantations.'

Dr Raman Letchumanan: This is a prime example of a 'gaji buta' minister paid by taxpayers but doesn't know the basics of her portfolio.

Zuraida Kamaruddin is the Plantation Industries and Commodities Minister and I can bet she has not spent one day in the rough and tumble of plantation life. She just shoots her mouth off like "orang utan attack humans first".

Now she says plantation work is lucrative and stress-free, yet in reality, there are no takers among the youth.

She should find out why, rather than blame the youths. Yet she gets at least a 90 percent performance rating from the prime minister, who is also reluctant to sack her when her own party wants her out.

I have to rebut this minister by reluctantly revealing here that I currently manage a 15-acre farm full-time. I knew 10 years ago I would not get workers for harvesting palm oil and decided to go for rubber. That has come true now.

Anyway, as an environmentalist, I abhor oil palms. Take it from the horse's mouth based on what I experience every day for the last 10 years.

Even for tapping rubber, I am offering up to RM3,000 for half a day's work (5-6 hours) plus all the benefits, a relatively easy task that can be undertaken by people aged up to 80, but there are no takers. Eventually, I decided to tap myself.

I challenge this minister to find a couple of workers for me if she truly believes in what she says.

Now coming to oil palm, whatever salary one offers, the locals simply cannot do this job, it is not they don't want to do it.

A fruit bunch can weigh from 20 to 50 kilos, just to move it is impossible. Imagine having to raise and throw it into a tractor loader, that is, if a tractor can access the plantation. Most times it is carried over long distances by hand.

Now if this is difficult, harvesting the fruits itself is a dangerous and almost

impossible task. The long poles up to 40 feet cannot be raised by one person.

The technique of cutting and slicing requires years of experience. Many have been ripped off by razor-sharp falling fronds. If the falling fruit bunch lands on them, they are minced meat.

Only those between the age of 20-40 can do this job. And I can bet no locals want to do it for whatever salary. If they are not careful, within a couple of years they will most likely be injured, crippled and attacked by wild animals.

One thing this minister should know: no foreign worker works for monthly wages of RM1,000-1,500 anymore. They demand payment by the tonnes of fruits harvested, and can easily earn much more than what local workers are paid.

Zuraida, after you retire or are sacked, please visit my farm and I will teach you the realities of farm or agriculture work. You can then encourage your family and relatives to take up agriculture, earn a lucrative income and a stress-free life.

Faustus: Zuraida is probably not well-informed of certain historical factors impinging on the present labour situation, including missed opportunities due to a short-sighted overall national policy initiative for this important industry.

We once did have a reasonably stable labour situation in the estates in the first few decades after independence. And much of the labour force comprised local citizens.

The changes in ownership of the estates, the increasing urbanisation, the profit motive to returns of investments among many new estate owners, the eventual flotsam/jetsam precariousness of the previously stable labour supply, the absence of effective promotion of equity in income and social instruments of income support to the largely Malaysian labour force, and the move to cheap foreign labour are the root causes.

Many of the displaced local citizens are another reason for the consequent unemployment-precarious livelihood and poverty of the younger generation of former estate dwellers now on the fringes of our urban centres.

Kilimanjaro: The late 'palm oil king' Bek Nielsen once told me that youths or families venturing out for greener pastures in the cities and factories usually return after a few months due to the pressure of the cost of living and city life.

Employers cannot continue to rely on cheap foreign labour. Additionally, their reliance on undocumented workers as a cheaper source of labour may distort the real income when shortages become a problem.

It is also one where the government is not treating the problem holistically.

Palm oil is an export earner and we are the second-largest exporter. Half-hearted measures may provide only half-hearted solutions.

The government should consider offering permanent residence status to Indians from the sub-continent, and particularly from South India, to encourage them as migrant labour as a timely and appropriate solution to this recurring problem.

Instead of building "solid castles", we shouldn't end up building castles in the air.

Orange Panther<sup>1466</sup>: There appears to be a disconnect between Malaysia having about 40 percent of its working population classified as B40, comprising people who often require government aid and cash handouts.

On the other, we have by some estimates about five million foreign workers here, legally or otherwise.

More need to be done to get the B40 folks to better their lives. Working in plantations is one of the ways and plantation owners must also meet halfway by improving the salaries and providing better amenities.

The industry must also self-regulate itself and cooperate among themselves to prevent the instance of workers jumping from plantation to plantation and not showing up for work without consent.

Perhaps a register of sorts to blacklist these workers. In the long run, it will only benefit the plantations as it will encourage a stable workforce.

We need to wean the system of dependency on foreign labour.

Oscar Kilo: Malaysia is doomed with all these incompetent self-serving ministers who live in the clouds and have no idea what is happening on the ground.

Does Zuraida not know that working in plantations is backbreaking manual labour?

Plantations are usually in faraway places. Do today's youth want to give up vibrant city life for remote places where there's probably weak mobile phone coverage, or no signal at all?

Of course, plantation managers and mill managers have a pretty good life with good pay and good perks, but we're not talking about managers or even executives here. We are talking about manual labour jobs that are usually done

by foreigners.

No doubt, we want more locals to do these manual labour jobs, but Zuraida's arguments are laughably simplistic and unhinged from reality.

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