

# Breaking down the barriers

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FROM classroom to concert hall, there will be a single recurring theme over the next four years — national unity.

It will appear in schools, in subjects about Malaysia's many cultures and customs. It will be clear in the look and content of television and radio programmes.

And it will be fostered through the efforts of 18 ministries, state governments and 22 public agencies up to the year 2010.

This is the National Unity and Integration Action Plan, which took effect after the cabinet approved it in May last year.

The ambitious plan is an attempt to break down the barriers between races, Malaysians in the peninsula and Sabah and Sarawak, and close the divide among regions in the peninsula. It recommends almost 200 strategies and lists hundreds of activities that agencies could implement.

The most commonly recommended activities for all ministries and agencies are old favourites — talks, forums and campaigns.

These are employed for every purpose from creating a better un-

**Malaysians have got their work cut out for them when it comes to making the National Unity and Integration Action Plan happen, write ELIZABETH JOHN, TAN CHOE CHOE and R. YASOTHAI**

derstanding of cultures to stressing the importance of national unity.

Much of the plan's focus is on increasing the public's knowledge and appreciation of cultures and customs, the federal constitution and the Rukun Negara.

Many of the programmes, like the Social Action Master Plan and Local Agenda 21, have been in place for years.

The action plan now expects agencies to get serious about making them work and bring people together.

Some like the Human Resources Ministry will basically continue doing what they have been all the while, which is creating a workforce responsive to changes and helping to maintain harmonious relations between employers and employees.

But many new ideas have also

been put forward and they include inter-faith dialogues, social impact assessments of government policies and educating parents and teachers on multi-racialism.

The lead agency — the National Unity and Integration Department — bears the biggest burden under the plan.

It will have to realise a vastly diverse set of programmes ranging from food festivals to creating role models in society.

Some of its work will overlap with those of the Education, Higher Education, Information and Culture, Arts and Heritage ministries.

Where it differs the most from other agencies is in its focus on fostering neighbourliness.

It will set up a task force to identify local issues and find solutions, hold direct dialogue with communities and launch a "My Neighbour, My Family" campaign.

The department will expand and increase volunteer neighbourhood patrol schemes to help fight crime in housing areas nationwide.

All these are aspects of the 2006-2010 Rukun Tetangga Action Plan meant to complement the unity plan. Under the action plan that will ring up a bill of RM257 million over five years, the department proposes to:

- Triple the number of volunteer patrol schemes, from 498 last August, to 1,700 in 2010.

- Increase the number of Rukun Tetangga (RT) areas by 200 a year. Till last August, there were 3,272 RT areas in the country.

- Raise the allocation for each RT to RM10,200 — close to double of what it has been given so far.

- Equip community and RT leaders with mediation skills to help them resolve problems.

- Get communities to share in-

formation and grow closer by expanding the RT Net programme.

- Set up new economic opportunities at the RT level.

- Get RTs to host exchange students from other states.

- Build new activity centres, unity complexes and RT centres.

The plan also recommends practical strategies like setting up more federal government agency branches in districts and standardising the administration system in the Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah and Sarawak.

Ministries are also expected to focus development in marginalised districts and increase the income sources for those in the rural areas to close the income gap.

It has several agencies working on an early detection system for conflicts and discourages the setting up of organisations that champion only one race or religion to the detriment of national unity.

Some actions have also been proposed to ensure companies' policies and programmes contain elements of national unity and all races are employed in every field of work.