

Towards better ties

■ BY ARINA MUSTHAFA
newsdesk@thesundaily.com

PETALING JAYA: Southeast Asia economic and political experts have expressed confidence that bilateral relations between Malaysia and Indonesia will be enhanced after Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's two-day official visit to Jakarta.

During a press conference at Bogor Palace in West Java on Monday, Anwar said he is committed to resolving the issues involving Indonesian workers in Malaysia.

Anwar and Indonesian President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) said the two governments would ensure that labour suppliers do not reap excessive profits from Indonesian workers in Malaysia.

Sunway University research professor Woo Wing Thye said Anwar's visit is vital to creating a win-win situation for both countries in terms of labour supply and the economic trajectory in the next five years.

Woo, who is also head of Asia headquarters of the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, said Malaysia recognises Indonesia as its equal partner in Southeast Asia.

"However, there are numerous news reports on the mistreatment faced by Indonesian workers and this caused the souring of ties between the two

> Analysts confident Anwar's visit to Indonesia will improve bilateral relations and resolve labour issues

countries, that depend on each other. The previous governments did not take the issue seriously. This was then fuelled by the infraction of government agencies concerning foreign workers.

"Anwar's action to resolve the issue through discussions with Indonesia should be lauded. Although the initiative to rebuild the trust with that country is long overdue, the prime minister acknowledges the existing problems and is working on implementing corrective measures," he told *theSun*.

While stressing that the visit is important, Woo said depending on Indonesia or other countries for foreign workers is unsustainable in the long term and volatile for the economy. He suggested the government focus on investing in local human resources instead to overcome long-term labour issues.

Universiti Malaya Department of Economics and Applied Statistics economics professor Dr Fatimah Kari

said Malaysia-Indonesia bilateral negotiations on worker supply must be transparent to prevent any form of policy breaches, which will affect the political and economic relationships between the two countries.

"Irresponsible employers did not follow all the rules and regulations stated in the memorandum of understanding when they acquired foreign workers.

"They ignored policies concerning worker welfare, such as providing sufficient living quarters, basic healthcare and wages that match their energy output.

"If we do not enforce transparency in all of our economic sectors, no desirable solutions can be enforced. With that, Anwar's efforts to negotiate with Jokowi will go down the drain."

'PM's visit directly impacts economy'

Fatimah said Malaysia did a good job during the Covid-19 vaccination rollout for foreign workers, and that the decision was made due to the urgency to slow down the infection rate in factories and construction sites.

From front page "If the government can make sure foreign workers receive their free Covid-19 vaccine in a year, the same formula needs to be used in managing Indonesian (and other foreign) workers so that their welfare is looked into."

Universiti Malaya Department of Southeast Asian Studies senior lecturer Dr Chong Wu Ling said Anwar's Indonesia visit directly impacts the Malaysian economy as it depends a lot on Indonesian workers in a few economic sectors.

"The Association of Employment Agencies (formerly known as Malaysian Association of Foreign Maid Agencies) said Malaysia still lacks some one million foreign workers, who are needed to sustain a few crucial sectors, especially construction, agriculture, services and manufacturing."

Chong said if both countries managed to resolve the employment issues, more Indonesian workers could come to Malaysia and take up jobs in those critical sectors, which would simultaneously boost the economy as well as diplomatic relationships with Indonesia.

"Through my observation, Anwar and Jokowi seem sincere in promoting economic cooperation that will benefit both countries in the long term," she said.

The visit to Indonesia is Anwar's first official overseas trip since being appointed prime minister on Nov 24 last year.