

RM20 mil veg and fish stockpile confounds

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By Chan Quan Min

Tiger is hot on the trail of Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's plan to stockpile RM20 million worth of vegetables and seafood to smooth out price swings. As hare-brained schemes go, this one is particularly poorly thought out, especially when the solution, while not as sexy, is staring the prime minister in the face.

Far more can be done than just throwing money at the problem of rising food prices. And the solution is far simpler than what the authorities may think.

In a news report in The Star last Saturday, Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak announced an allocation of – wait for it – RM20 million for a special programme to curb the rising cost of seafood and vegetables.

The Federal Agricultural Marketing Authority (FAMA) and the National Fishermen's Association (Nekmat) have each been tasked with creating a stockpile of vegetables and seafood respectively.

Details were scant – naturally – as all hare-brained schemes typically go.

From what little information on the stockpiling programme that was available, Tiger understands that the Minister for Agriculture and Agro-based Industries Ismail Sabri Yaakob would personally oversee the gradual release of stale vegetables from the stockpile such as cabbages, red chillies, onions, coconuts, ginger and potatoes so as to ensure that supply and consequently price remains stable.

Not to forget the varied varieties of fish to be stockpiled under the scheme such as cencaru, kembong, selar, tongkol and kerisi. For readers unfamiliar with the Malay names of commonly consumed fish in Malaysia, the first three named are from the mackerel family while tongkol is skipjack tuna.

The obvious challenge here is the difficulty of stockpiling perishables.

Governments the world over are known to hoard essentials such as grain, cooking oil and canned goods. These are staple products and will keep-well for at least a few months. But stockpiling cabbage? Almost as unheard of as stockpiling mackerel.

The sum of money named, RM20 million, might look impressive at first glance, splashed out on news headlines. But in the whole scheme of things, RM20 million is pittance.

If the authorities intend to do this right then a national distribution system would need to be set up. A temperature-controlled supply chain (cold chain) is a must if we are to ensure that the seafood does not turn into – insert any of the following – belacan, budu, cinalok, fish sauce. All go well when combined with the country's current favourite vegetable, kangkung or water spinach.

Again, RM20 million is not all that much money. Given our population size of 29 million, according to recent estimates, the stabilisation fund would amount to only 69 sen per person.

And, according to estimates, in 2012 food imports were close to RM95 million a day alone.

Given the small size of the fund and the complete lack of any action plan on the stockpile, Tiger reckons this fishy scheme will turn out to be nothing more than a multi-million ringgit grant to two agencies representing critical voter banks to the ruling Barisan Nasional party.

Like always, the real solution is staring Prime Minister Najib in the face. Instead of cooking up knee-jerk reactions to the kangkung fiasco, he should look into a longer-term solution to food security in Malaysia.

Farmers markets such as that organised by FAMA are one avenue to bring cheaper priced produce to city-dwellers. Providing an avenue for farmers to sell direct to consumers cuts out the middleman and is ideal for small to medium scale farming operations prevalent in the country.

Instead, Najib and the ministry have decided that government intervention to flood the market with imported vegetables and fish from the said stockpile is a sound solution even as they call for reducing our reliance on imports.

Instead of taking a practical approach, Najib and the ministry have instead opted to structure a scheme that looks good only on paper, especially as a news headline

But vegetables and seafood, along with news are highly perishable commodities. Next week, the media outlets that reported on the stockpile scheme would have moved on to other news. But what happens to the fish and vegetable stockpile if it can't be unloaded on the public quickly.

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