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## Sudden exodus will hit sectors: MEF

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PETALING JAYA: Despite the one-year extension to the 6P programme for foreign workers, employers associations are kicking up a fuss and are urging the Government to allow the 352,000 affected workers to work in Malaysia for up to 10 more years.

Prior to the extension, these workers are to leave the country in stages with 120,000 to depart next month.

Saying that any sudden exodus of workers would badly hit the construction and plantation industries, they said the policy of limiting the working period of the foreign workers might result in Malaysia turning into a training ground for low-skilled foreign workers.

Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) Executive Director Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan said the construction and plantation sectors would face "great difficulties" when the workers leave after the one-year extension period is over.

"We have to recruit a new batch of workers, which could take up to eight months, and then train them before their productivity is up to scratch.

Imagine the delays this would cause the construction industry and the resulting penalties builders will have to pay when projects are late," Shamsuddin said at a press conference after launching a guidebook for employers on the recruitment of foreign workers at the MEF office here.

Shamsuddin said the departure of the 352,000 workers would also affect the plantation industry and this has happened in the past, such as when RM1bil worth of fruit went bad due to a shortage of workers at harvest time.

Responding to the concerns, the Immigration Department's Deputy Director-General Datuk Sakib Kusmi said the foreign workers who would be sent back after the end of the 6P programme in December next year (2015) would be allowed to return to work in Malaysia after at least three months.

"If the employers are really in need of skilled foreign workers, the workers can return after a cooling-off period of between three and six months," he said.

He, however, did not elaborate on how long they would be allowed to stay after coming back.

Home Ministry Acting Secretary-General Datuk Alwi Ibrahim on Friday announced the extension with immediate effect, meaning that permits of some of the workers involved would expire in December 2015 and others in December 2016.

The 6P programme, implemented in 2011 to reduce the illegal immigrant population, required them to register, after which they were given work permits for up to three years, which would expire from January next year.

Shamsuddin said about 100,000 illegal foreign workers from the nearly 500,000 who signed up under the 6P programme were employed in the construction sector. Malaysia, he said, would lose out unless there was a rethink of the country's foreign worker policy.

"Unskilled foreign workers who come to Malaysia to work in construction become sought after after a number of years because they pick up skills. If we send them back, they will not want to come back to Malaysia because they will by then be

able to command higher salaries, due to their skills, in places such as the Middle East," said Shamsuddin.

Malaysia's legal foreign worker population has increased from about 500,000 in the 1980s to 2.89 million at present.

In addition, the number of illegal foreign workers are estimated to range between three and six million according to MEF's figures.