

Stretch of holidays no fun for businesses

KUALA LUMPUR: It's Chinese New Year and the capital is deserted once again as citizens enjoy one of the many holidays observed by the nation.

But the non-stop stream of festivals, which began last October when Muslims celebrated Hari Raya Aidilfitri, is being met with grumbles from businesses and industries which say the nation cannot afford all the merry-making.

After Muslims celebrated Aidilfitri, it was the Hindus' turn with Deepavali, then Christmas, followed by the New Year and now, Chinese New Year.

"I can't get anything done!" laments lawyer Karen Lynn Johnson, who is frantically preparing for her upcoming nuptials.

"Every supplier I call comes back to me with the same reply: wait until after Chinese New Year."

The stretch of holidays saw a lull at construction sites, shopping malls and restaurants as city-dwellers flooded the highways to return to their hometowns and villages.

"For business people, it is never in their interests as it affects sales and trading," said M. Vivekananda of the Malaysian Employers' Federation.

"Our stand has always been that public holidays should not inhibit business activities. The markets should be kept open."

Business people complain that sales figures drop, trading on the bourse is halted and manufacturers who need to keep their factories open have to pay hefty overtime and triple holiday rates.

"Not only is it expensive, it disrupts the production of goods and sometimes deadlines cannot be met because there is not enough manpower," Vivekananda said.

Malaysia has 16 national holidays when the stock market, banks, schools and businesses are closed.

In addition, each state has its own set of holidays, so residents of Selangor are generally entitled to four or five additional holidays.

There are no figures on the costs involved, but in February last year, exports shrank 14.41 per cent to RM41.1 billion compared with the previous month due to "shorter working days and festivities", according to government data.

"On the stock market, millions of ringgit in business

NUMBER OF PUBLIC HOLIDAYS IN A YEAR

26

in Cambodia

20

in Indonesia

16

in Malaysia

11

in Singapore

10

in the United States and Britain

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of the Malaysian
Employers' Federation

transactions are lost and we miss the opportunity to make money," said businessman Michael Chiam.

"But this is how it is, everyone gladly celebrates every festival together," said Chiam, a shipping merchant who chairs the Commercial Employers' Association of Peninsular Malaysia.

Singapore has a modest 11 public holidays, in line with the norm in many developed nations like the United States and Britain, which both have 10. On the other end of the scale, impoverished Cambodia has the region's highest number of holidays at 26.

Indonesia, meanwhile, cut three of its 23 holidays this year to boost the economy amid fears of a global slowdown. — AFP