

Affected sectors crying out for foreign workers

PETALING JAYA: Almost one year after it was announced that the recruitment of all foreign workers would be suspended, employers in affected sectors are sending out an SOS.

The lack of workers, increases in operational costs, and reduced profits are an everyday headache, they said.

Some employers have given up and closed shop.

Indian-Muslim restaurant owners say the sector is short of 30,000 workers for 10,000 restaurants.

In December last year, about 15 to 20 restaurants had a change in hands because the owners were unable to manage them, said Malaysian Muslim Restaurant Owners Association (Presma) president Ayoob Khan Muhamad Yakub.

"We hope the Government lifts the freeze or else we can see at least another 10%-20% of mamak restaurants closing down," said Ayoob.

Malaysian Indian Restaurant Owners Association (Primas) honorary chairman Datuk R.

Ramalingam Pillai, who is representing 1,263 members nationwide, said that some of the restaurants are on the verge of closing down.

"Our members have complained over the last six months that once their foreign workers' permits expire, they have no replacement.

"We tried to hire Malaysians but most of them only wanted managerial posts or to be drivers, store keepers and clerks," he said.

He also noted that the rising US dollar resulted in the hike of imported spices and raw materials by as much as 35%.

"Despite all this, some have not increased their prices for many years as they have taken into consideration the Government's call not to raise prices," said Ramalingam.

Deputy chairman J. Suresh said 180 Indian restaurants closed down last year due to the lack of foreign workers.

The Federal Territory Bumiputra Traders Association Datuk Rosli Sulaiman said some traders have resorted to hiring illegal foreign workers.

"We urge the authorities to allow us to hire foreign workers especially for the small businesses," he said.

Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) vice-president Dr Michael Chiam said the federation had received a lot of demand from certain industries for workers but they could not be filled.

"This will affect our trade. If there is no supply but a lot of demand, prices will definitely go up," he added.

Production of vegetables and livestock has also taken a hit.

Cameron Highlands Vegetable Growers Association secretary Chay Ee Mong said farmers around Malaysia have seen a 20% reduction in output.

He said for Cameron Highlands alone, there was a production rate of 600 metric tonnes per day for 2016.

That number has dropped to 480 metric tonnes per day due to manpower shortage.

"This is why customers see that sometimes vegetable prices are too high and not fixed," said Chay.

He added the farms are not operating at full capacity since the freeze of foreign workers.

The drop in the currency, added Chay, also meant foreign workers find more higher paying jobs in other countries.

"And when they decide to leave us, we just cannot get replacements."

Federation of Livestock Farmers' Associations Malaysia president Datuk Jeffrey Ng said all the farms in the country are currently suffering a shortage of 5,000 workers.

He added that the loss in production has also resulted in the rise of the prices of broiler chickens as supply is very tight.

SME Association of Malaysia president Datuk Michael Kang said SMEs are only running at 50-60% production.

"A lot of them are struggling to keep up with production.

"They have no choice but to hire illegal workers," he said.