

Cost factor a key point of contention

NATION

Sunday, 07 Feb 2021



Risky business: As many as 1,871 factory workers, which included 1,428 foreigners, undergoing Covid-19 testing in Serkam, Melaka. — Bernama

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PETALING JAYA: The initiative to place foreign workers at selected hotels as a temporary move to curb Covid-19 is welcome, though some stakeholders have expressed concern over the cost factor.

Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH) chief executive officer Yap Lip Seng said there were limitations to the initiative, although discussions were held with stakeholders to match the needs of employers of foreign workers with that of hotel operators.

Yap said: “The initiative is likely to attract only a small number of hotels and the recommended monthly rental rate is deemed to be far too low for hotels.”

In a statement yesterday, the Tourism, Arts and Culture Ministry (Motac) said the cost to rent a room will be RM200 per month per person, and there will be an additional RM20 monthly charge for each worker to cover utilities.

“The initiative would have served both industries (employers of foreign workers and hotels) better if the government subsidises part of the cost,” said Yap when contacted.

“Although the hotel industry is looking at supporting the government in addressing the spread of Covid-19 among foreign workers due to poor living conditions, the plan may not serve the hotels’ economics and operational needs.”

Yap added factors that need to be taken into consideration include the expected high wear and tear on the hotel, as well as different needs of these workers in comparison with typical hotel guests.

“Capacity of hotel rooms is also limited by bed setup, while special control measures are needed to ensure physical distancing is practised,” said Yap.

He said under the arrangement, Motac will function as the “introducer”, following which hotels and employers will enter into an independent contract and control mechanism via a third party platform.

Federation of Manufacturers Malaysia (FMM) president Tan Sri Soh Thian Lai said they welcome the idea although they were not consulted by Motac.

“The industry could consider this as a temporary solution as long as the cost is kept affordable and comparable to what they are currently paying.

“The option to use temporary accommodation should be voluntary and not mandated on industries,” said Soh.

“Other factors to be considered include the location of the temporary accommodation in relation to the workplace, as well as other terms and conditions that includes other costs that need to be negotiated with hotel operators.”

Real Estate and Housing Developers’ Association (Rehda) Malaysia president Datuk Soam Heng Choon said the corporate sector knows what it needs to do given the current situation, adding they are all fully aware of obligations expected under the environmental, social and corporate governance criteria.

However, Soam questioned the viability of placing workers in hotels.

“Even in a cheap hotel, it will not be that cheap. You can implement this, but there is a cost involved. Each project or whatever business that is out there has a cost to it.

“We have to make sure that whatever we do is within the cost, otherwise the project will run into a loss,” he said.

Soam noted that construction workers were different from foreign workers employed in other sectors such as the food and beverage or manufacturing.

“Construction workers are temporary, they are here for a two-year period, or a maximum of three. They also move from site to site, and do not stay in temporary accommodation forever,” he said.

Alliance for Safe Community chairman Tan Sri Lee Lam Thye also raised the cost factor, though acknowledging that housing workers in a hotel will help to contain Covid-19 as most recent clusters originated from the workplace.

“Will employers find it affordable? Employers are also having difficulties now. Even if the workers are housed there, it will only be on temporary basis.

“I think employers will eventually have to find them long-term housing. I am also sure they will be asking the government for some form of subsidy for this,” he said.

Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) executive director Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan said the initiative was a cause of concern as employers are presently deducting RM100 per month for the accommodation of each foreign worker.

“The said amount will possibly be not enough to pay for even a one-day hotel stay,” said Shamsuddin, who said that MEF was not consulted on this initiative.

He added that transportation for workers to their workplaces would also be an issue.