

# Acute shortage of manual harvesters

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**NATION**

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PETALING JAYA: Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) president Datuk Dr Syed Hussain Syed Husman is urging the government to address the labour shortage in the country, especially in the palm oil industry which is continuing to experience losses for planters and the nation, due to an acute shortage of manual harvesters.

“Even though the government granted special approval for the intake of 32,000 new foreign workers from Bangladesh and Indonesia last month to ease labour shortage in the plantation sector, but these workers have still not arrived.

“The palm oil industry may not be able to compete with our neighbours because of the higher cost of sales and wastage here,” he said.

Syed Hussain said the construction sector in the country is also facing a serious shortage of workers causing some major projects to fall behind schedule.

Industries such as electrical and electronics, furniture and agriculture are also facing the same issue. With domestic tourism and food and beverage outlets reopening as the country enters the recovery phase, Syed Hussain said these sectors face a shortage of workers too.

“Now with the resumption of work at the workplace, families are in urgent need of domestic helpers to take care of their young children and elderly,” he added.

Malaysia’s foreign worker hiring freeze to curb the spread of the pandemic has resulted in labour shortages across industries that are heavily dependent on foreign workers, especially the 3D (dirty, dangerous and difficult) jobs.

Syed Hussain said due to acute labour shortages in the plantation, construction, manufacturing and some services sectors, the government should reconsider the policy of extending the freeze on intake of new foreign workers until Dec 31 this year.

The issue of dependence of foreign workers in specific 3D sectors that are shunned by locals – despite more than 748,800 being unemployed in August – must also be addressed pragmatically, he said.

“While MEF supports the government’s call to reduce over-dependence on foreign workers, especially low-skilled workers, as Malaysia moves towards the adoption of higher technology and automation, the transition should be well-timed and monitored to eliminate disruption to business operations,” he added.

An encouraging labour force situation was seen in August 2021 as more economic activities were permitted to resume in compliance with the standard operating procedures, according to the Statistics Department.

Chief Statistician Datuk Seri Dr Mohd Uzir Mahidin said this was indicated by the rise in employment while unemployment decreased during the month.

In August, the number of unemployed persons reduced to 748,800 and the unemployment rate declined to 4.6% compared to July, which recorded 778,200 unemployed persons and an unemployment rate of 4.8%.

Syed Hussain said based on the latest MEF survey, employers are taking a “wait and see” approach in terms of hiring as the Covid-19 vaccination rate improves.

A poll conducted by MEF found that 31.1% of its members stated that they would be hiring in the next six months.

Syed Hussain there is a need to enhance the confidence of businesses to boost the domestic economy through stimulus packages as businesses need time to move up the value chain.

He added that there is also a need to find new ways to manage talent by shifting focus to quality job creation, and to assist workers in securing jobs in growth sectors through upskilling and reskilling programmes.