

Chaos without foreign workers

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IF all foreign workers, legal or otherwise, were to call in sick, at the same time, for a week or two, chaos would reign in the country, I believe.

Out go the Indonesian and Filipino maids, the Nepalese security men, the Bangladeshi construction workers, the Vietnamese factory hands, the Indian restaurant workers, and the Myanmar crew at the Selayang wholesale market.

Some of us would be lucky to get out of the house. Who is go-

ing to clean the house, cook, do the laundry, babysit, and be there for us to boss around?

Our offices and buildings could be dirty, our food will take longer to arrive, our roads and buildings will take forever to build and we will have to mop our kitchen floors.

Perhaps, even all the grand strategies of the nation's development plans would need a re-look. Who, after all, is going to lay the bricks, pour concrete and wave red flags to direct

traffic at construction sites? Who will keep our plantations and farms humming to the tune of our renewed agriculture policy? Who will keep our malls and hotels spick and span for the billions of tourism ringgit we hope to rake in this year?

To Malaysians who think foreign workers are to be tolerated and the country is better off without them, think again.

Not only are they doing the jobs many of us are not keen

on, they have also contributed to the better usage of the Malaysian workforce. As an added bonus, they improve the quality of our lives, even if your maids don't wash your cars.

There are 10.5 million Malaysians employed, and 1.8 million legal foreigners working here, making them about 15 per cent of the combined workforce. If we were to assume the existence of a substantial number of illegal workers, then foreign workforce could be at 20 per cent, or even more.

Now, if 20 per cent of the people in your department call in sick over an extended period, the rest of the staff would have to double up to make up for their absence. Now, consider that the 20 per cent are doing jobs many of us are not too keen on, the so-called dirty, dangerous and dull tasks.

The impact of the foreign workers has been greatly underestimated, especially in allowing Malaysians to pursue higher-value activities that could contribute, presumably, better economic returns for themselves and the country.

Take the case of domestic help. More Malaysians were able to seek employment offering better wages because they could sub-contract their domestic responsibilities to these foreigners. The country, too, benefits from the freeing of some of the workforce into the job market.

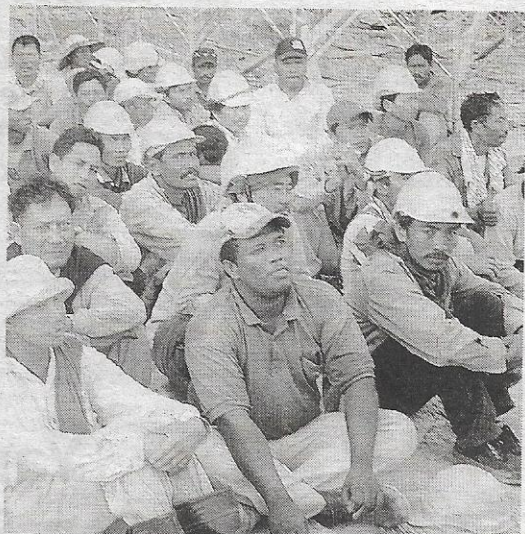
This works out well since the upkeep of domestic help is low, most times lower than the monthly instalment of cars. For that amount, some of us get to keep our day jobs, our house and our kids fed.

If we believe in the trickle-down theory of the economy and the chain reaction of productivity to the economy, then we, as a nation, have benefited from this foreign maids syndrome, even if we employ none ourselves.

The domestic help sector is almost exclusively powered by foreign labour, some half a million of them registered. The food and beverage business is getting to be more dependent on foreigners, while the retail business is strongly supported by them.

The plantations sector has, for a while now, been Malaysian-owned but foreign powered.

At a tea plantation in



The building industry depends on foreign labour to get the job done.

Cameron Highlands, the workers have spray-painted their quarters, once housing Malaysian families, with the names of faraway places in Indonesia. At a funfair in Sim-pang Tiga Ijok, near Kuala Selangor, the rickety rides are manned by bored-looking Indonesians. In some restaurants, not only are the waiters foreign, they also fry *char kuay teow* and man the cash registers, with the Malaysian owners nowhere to be seen.

Cheaper foreign labour has not only improved our quality of life, but has allowed for better economic returns on our investments.

It was reported that if only Malaysians were to be employed for construction jobs, then contractors would incur 30 per cent higher cost that would have to be passed on. Imported sweat and tears mean lower mortgages for us.

I think this foreign workforce, which handles the jobs we do not want to do, collectively offers us better returns than the white-collared foreign workers, euphemistically called expatriates, who, being better dressed and fewer in number, are better tolerated by us.

The foreign workforce is an essential element in our social and economic beings; they are integral to our economic value chain. Even some of our football teams depend on foreigners to bring in the goals.

There is no way now, it seems, that we can do without them. It is not an understatement to say that some of the grease that allows the cogs of our economy to move belongs to foreign elbows. We would not have progressed this far if not for economic hardships in

neighbouring countries opening a labour supply pipeline to our shores.

Even the illegal, undocumented aliens have been important. Construction firms and plantations hire them, hoping that the authorities would understand that ripening oil palm fruit bunches wait for no one, or that the completion of a project on time allows for more efficient redistribution of resources.

Many of the illegals have had a hand in building our homes, roads, buildings, and our way of life, into the reality they are now.

The heightened demand from programmes such as the Ninth Malaysia Plan would likely test our resolve in handling the foreign labour issue. We could easily look the other way in the face of some irregularities, as the bigger picture beckons.

So, where will we be when the bottom falls out of the unlimited supply of foreign hired hands when their own domestic economies improve, or when more attractive and rewarding destinations emerge?

Our potential foreign labour problem, ironically, begins with the fact that it is cheap. This means there is little incentive for us to be less dependent. But there will come a time when we will no longer be able to afford them.

But our social infrastructure, labour policy and economic planning seem to be hedging on the fact that we will continue to have them around for a long time.

Obviously, there is a need to begin making the dirty, dull, dreary and dangerous jobs more attractive to Malaysians soon.