

## Datuk Seri M. Saravanan

By ZAKIAH KOYA  
newsdesk@thestar.com.my

FOR companies which do not treat its foreign workers fairly, Human Resources Minister Datuk Seri M. Saravanan has three words: "I am coming".

The Human Resources Minister is not one to mince his words as he highlights that only 30% of the 56,000 employers who employ foreign workers are complying with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Conventions – the global standard on how to treat workers.

The Tapah MP and MIC Deputy President says that under the ILO Conventions, employers must provide proper housing, equal remuneration and care for the well-being of their foreign workers.

Stressing that his aim is to make Malaysia a desirable place for everyone to work in, Saravanan says he never intended to pick on certain companies for their misdoings – under his watch, the Human Resources Ministry intends to be one which looks after the welfare of employees and employers as both need each other.

"To me, regardless of whether you are a high income industry or not, as long as you comply with the ILO conventions, you will be okay.

"During the pandemic and the economic crisis, the biggest challenge is to make sure industries survive, and sustainability is the key.

"We spent about RM2bil through our wage subsidy programmes. Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said the Perikatan Nasional government must take care of both lives and livelihoods.

"With the wage subsidies, we were able to save almost 300,000 companies from closing shop. And that involved about 2.7 million workers," says Saravanan, pointing out RM200mil was used to assist with the screening of

# Working for the workers

The Human Resources Minister aims to make Malaysia a desirable place for everyone to work in. Treat your foreign workers unfairly and you will face my wrath, he warns.

workers to lessen the financial burden of employers.

He adds three million employers got in touch with the ministry for their various programmes such as wage subsidies and reskilling programmes.

"All this despite the current economic climate which is not only affecting Malaysia but also the world, a pandemic and a certain degree of political instability.

"We reduced the levy payment for the Human Resources Development fund and we had a paper loss of about RM800mil. We also reduced other payments for employers.

Across the board, we reduced the burden of employers with high hopes that we would be directly assisting the employees," Saravanan notes.

He also points out that the pandemic has pushed the ministry to work in an unprecedented situation and ensure that employers pay their workers their full salaries even though the workers have to work from home due to the movement control order.

"Most of the employers thought we were acting on the humanitarian grounds but we were actually acting within the Human Resources Act whereby employers are

obliged to pay their employees, even during an MCO.

"I have to be honest. Foreign workers are employed by 56,000 employers in this country. Out of that, not even 30% complied with the standards that are due to the foreign workers under them. I am not talking about local workers as they are given Socso and Employers' Provident Fund.

"Nevertheless, during the pandemic, our ministry has been able to ensure that most of these employers who hire foreign workers complied with the standards.

"These foreign workers have come all the way here after much sacrifice, incurring a lot of cost and many other hidden costs in their source countries as they pay a huge amount to unregistered agents.

"In Bangladesh, there are a few thousand agents collecting money from foreign workers who come here – huge sums.

"These foreign workers come all the way to develop our nation and our industries, don't you think they should be treated fairly?"

"There are 12,000 illegal agents and the protocol between Malaysia and Bangladesh had not addressed that part.

"I have sent my protocol proposals including that there should not be more than 250 agents in Bangladesh which are recognised by both governments.

"This is because when there is abuse, we would be able to track who brought the foreign worker into the country. Today, we are not able to track who brought them in.

"Our country will be respected internationally for looking after everybody's wellbeing. We must become a nation where people are happy to work in the right atmosphere.

"I am trying my very best to ensure that Malaysia does not go to the Tier 3 of the

Trafficking In Person's (TIP) Report – a human rights global measurement which takes into account labour rights.

(Malaysia's global human rights ranking as the country is currently on the Tier 2 Watch List for the third consecutive year. In June last year, the US State Department placed Malaysia on the Tier 2 Watch List in its lat-

est TIP report.)

"I do not differentiate companies whether they are big or small as at the end of the day I am answerable to the ILO Conventions, which does not care about the size of the company.

"In the future, before employers employ foreign workers, we will check if they have enough facilities to house their workers. However, our priority during this pandemic is rectifying the present situation.

"Overall, the abuse is a very small number but even then, one is bad enough to give Malaysia a bad image.

"One company's misdoing can bring down the image of all Malaysian companies.

"I am taking steps to ensure that such companies (who do not abide by the ILO Conventions) are monitored closely.

"On record, we have 2.1 million documented foreign workers. How often do you come across complaints such as salaries not paid, abuse and as such? Unfortunately, in today's world, the people are interested in sensationalising news.

"Even I receive calls from my Indian counterparts about Indian nationals being abused by Malaysian employers or authorities.

"I always ask them that if we have a few hundred thousand Indian foreign workers, why not talk about the hundreds of thousands (that are not abused)?"

"One or two cases (of abuse) and everybody jumps as if Malaysia is a bad place to work in," says Saravanan.

He also states that as most complaints received are about payment of salaries, the ministry will propose an e-wages system for foreign workers.

"The system will notify the ministry if staff is not paid on time. If they have to be paid by 7th of the month. Some of the employers, although they pay employees, will pay in bits or not on time. We have to look at this carefully."

Saravanan says that he wants to ensure that the Workers' Minimum Standards of Housing and Amenities Act 1990 (Act 446) is implemented fully by the year end.

"I announced it in June. The industries cannot say they do not know the Housing Act as they should be sensitive to what is passed in the Parliament. I gave ample time until September to comply.

"Even then, I said until Jan 1, the idea is to create awareness and not enforcement. However, some sectors took that announcement for granted. When I saw some of the photographs of the housing quarters of foreign workers, I made the remark, yes, it was deplorable. I thought that was a clear signal.

"As an ordinary human being, I will not buy the excuse that they could not provide decent housing,

"During the British colonial times, they brought in Indians to work in the estates and even then, they were given proper housing with schools and temples. That is why you see Tamil schools and temples in rubber estates.

"It seems that we complied with the ILO convention better before the Independence as compared to now."

He also refutes allegations that he had taken on any individual company.

"If everything at a company was in order, would I be taking action against it?"

"You can't blame me. Do you expect me to keep quiet as the Human Resources Minister?"

"If you don't comply, I will come after you. I don't pick and choose.

"But then again, it depends on the number of workers. Do you think I would go immediately to inspect companies which only have two workers?"

"I will check the big companies first," says Saravanan.

He added the ministry is committed to changing the mindset of the people and preparing enough digital talents for the next 10 years in time for the Industrial Revolution 4.0.

"If we are not prepared, we will defeat the purpose of automation and end up importing foreign digital talents as happened in the US when they created Silicon Valley," says Saravanan.

He says he may seem to be going out of his way to get things done, but that is because of his background.

"I have been an ordinary worker before I started my political career.

"I was an office boy and I know how it feels not to be treated fairly by your employers. I am not a minister from Oxford or Cambridge.

"I know how difficult it is to wait for the salary after the 20th of every month and be delayed being paid for another six or seven days. I have gone through the mill.

"Treat the workers fairly. They can be senior management or lower ranking workers. Remember, it is because of them that you are where you are now.

"You employers might have the brains but it is the workers who carry the employers on their shoulders.

"I want to do many things and I don't really have much time.

"But I have good officers, a good secretary-general and his deputies as well as good department heads who are only waiting for the orders to attack those who do not comply with the law," says Saravanan.



M. SARAVANAN

Watch the video  
TheStarTV.com

