



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

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Press Statement

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Food security issues are now haunting Malaysia

While the Consumers Association of Penang (CAP) welcomes the chicken export from 1 June we regret that our past warnings to the authorities about food insecurity dangers had fallen on deaf ears. Failure to revamp the entire agricultural policy which includes a total review of the food production and distribution chain is responsible for the current crisis.

In 2018, we echoed the concerns of agricultural scientist Mohd Peter Davis who warned that Malaysia would risk starvation if it experienced a massive economic meltdown.

Malaysia, unlike food-producing countries such as Thailand and Vietnam, does not have self-sustainable food production. About 60 per cent of our food is imported. In times of crisis, food-producing countries would prioritise feeding their hungry population before selling food to other countries like ours.

There have been claims about the existence of cartels and middlemen who profited more than the farmers or the retailers. The government has been giving assurances that the issue is under investigation but there has been no outcome of the investigation, at least to the public.

If there is evidence that food cartels are responsible for the current shortage, those involved should be severely punished because it is a gross violation of people's basic right to food.

In the meantime, the government should step in to control chicken prices because chicken and eggs are a common source of protein, particularly for the lower-income group. The government should not heed the call of some poultry breeders to allow chicken prices to be dictated by the free market.

On the other hand, we would advise people to try to stay away from chicken and eggs during this period so as to ease the supply crisis. It was reported that about 3.6 million chickens were exported every month. If the ban is in effect, there will be about 116,000 extra chickens for domestic consumption daily for domestic consumption.

We want to know if government agencies monitor the food situation in the country and if farmers' associations are required to alert the government of any anticipated problem.

Food issues have been plaguing Malaysia since the 1980s when the country started to sideline agriculture in favour of industrialization and the service sectors. Hence, we urge the government not to address the issue of food security on a piecemeal basis but first to have an overview, identify all the problems in all sectors and formulate long-term solutions.

With escalating food prices, the dietary intake of those in the lower-middle and below 40 (B-40) income families is badly affected. MIDF Research warned that Malaysia's food inflation is on an upward path in the coming months, attributed to rising global commodity prices, domestic supply chain disruptions and depreciation of the ringgit.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (U.N. 1948), Article 25, states that "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food".

CAP is reiterating its call to revamp the existing agro-food strategies with firm government policies such as:

- Helping smallholding farmers to market their produce by providing them links to a comprehensive marketing system.
- Emphasising on research that helps to increase production.
- In the short-term legalising foreign workers who turned ‘illegal’ because of technicalities such as their employers have failed to apply for their working permit. This will help elevate the existing shortage of farm workers as well as those in other sectors.
- Encouraging farmers to switch to more efficient and sustainable agricultural methods so as to reduce their dependence on foreign labour and to free their time for other work.
- The government working with banks to provide low-interest loans to farmers.
- The government should set up food safety and quality centre for produce to ensure that both imported and local produce meet established standards and safe food for consumption.
- Converting idle land to farmland, either for food crops or for animal feed.
- Encouraging farmers to produce value-added products.

We, therefore, urge the government to emphasise on food security which calls for a robust agricultural policy. However, this pandemic has shown us that a good agricultural policy should include animal feed and the production of other agricultural needs. These will help to reduce the impact of food supply chain disruption or a weak ringgit.

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