



Foreign workers for the job

More than 10,000 migrant workers needed for the MRT project

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MORE than 10,000 migrant workers are expected to be brought in to work on the My Rapid Transit (MRT) project which will start construction this year.

While this may automatically conjure up images of increased social ills, there are several advantages to this.

Besides the fact that foreign workers are needed to get the MRT physically up and running, experts say the migration of these workers would provide an opportunity for Malaysians involved in manual labour to move up the occupational value chain.

"In a massive job such as the MRT, there will be all sort of categories of work. Malaysian labourers should be given priority to move towards more supervisory roles after some training," says Dr Yeah Kim Leng, chief economist at RAM Holdings Group Bhd.

"It is an opportunity for them to upgrade their skills, the overall impact would be good for the local economy as well as we move towards a higher-income nation," he says.

According to Yeah, there are currently a few hundred thousand unskilled and semi-skilled Malaysians working abroad in countries with stronger currencies relative to the ringgit and employed in a myriad of jobs including in the construction, transportation and food and beverage industries.

The MRT project should be able to attract some of these individuals back, provided they could be offered higher unskilled and semi-



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skilled level of work, he adds.

As for the social ills often associated with migrant workers, Yeah says that there should be a proper system to manage all aspects of the

hiring process including ensuring that there is proper housing for the workers.

MRT Co, which is the project and asset owner of the MRT, has

said that it would take the initiative together with Gamuda Bhd-MMC Corp Bhd, its project delivery partner to ensure a proper system would be implemented.

The details of this are still being worked out, MRT Co tells *StarBizWeek*.

Malaysia attracts a large number of migrant workers into the country. According to official records, the number quadrupled from less than 500,000 in 1999 to more than two million, making up about 17% of the country's workforce in 2008.

It has been reported that the number has since reduced to less than two million over the last two years as many migrant workers were sent back to their home countries at the height of the global financial crisis in 2009.

Traditionally, Malaysia has employed migrant workers from Indonesia, Bangladesh, Cambodia and Nepal to carry out manual work especially in the areas of construction and manufacturing.

In most cases, company owners claim that they cannot survive without foreign workers because most locals are just not willing take on blue-collar jobs due to unattractive wages and benefits.

This issue, however, is not unique to Malaysia.

Malaysian Rating Corp Bhd chief economist Nor Zahidi Alias says countries in growth mode such as Singapore and the Gulf states, are also experiencing the same phenomenon of having to depend on foreign manual labour in various sectors across their economies.

"Fast-tracking economic development is the main reason for the countries' increasing dependence on foreign manual labour," he says.