

# 'IT'S DOABLE IN 5 WEEKS'

Expert says proper lodgings for foreign workers can be built quickly, but Rehda points to obstacle

VEENA BABULAL  
KUALA LUMPUR  
news@nst.com.my

**E**MPLOYERS can build lodging facilities for migrant workers that comply with updated regulations in five weeks if local authorities could fast-track construction and planning approvals.

Built environment expert Dr Nor Atiah Ismail said this could be done if each local authority could set up a task force specially to deal with approvals for migrant workers throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

"This is all it takes if the land is ready, and the Works Ministry and Human Resources Ministry that regulate centralised labour quarters and *kongsi*, respectively, come out with an updated Covid-19 standard operating procedure (SOP) list for the housing of migrant workers.

"The approvals itself would take around four weeks, because even with the task force serving as a one-stop centre, other departments have to sign off on the plans.

"Once that's in the bag, it would take one more week," she told the *New Straits Times*.

Nor Atiah was responding to the three-month grace period that the government was giving employers for compliance with the Workers' Minimum Standards of Housing and Amenities Act 1990 [Act 446] that comes into effect on Monday.

She said the Health Ministry, Works Ministry or Human Resources Ministry, technical departments and even the police had to sign off on the plans, including the Drainage and Irrigation Department, Fire and Rescue Department and Land and Mines Department.

Nor Atiah said a major setback could be the apparent lack of SOP from the Human Resources Ministry that catered to the pandemic, or the updated Workers' Minimum Standards of Housing and Amenities Act 1990 [Act 446].

The associate professor from Universiti Putra Malaysia was referring to a statement by Defence Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri



Migrant workers resting under a highway construction site in Ampang Jaya, near Kuala Lumpur, yesterday. PIC BY ASWADI ALIAS

Yaakob, who said Human Resources Minister Datuk Seri M. Saravanan would be issuing a statement on detailed updates made to the act.

Ismail Sabri said the act would cover aspects such as maximum persons allowed to occupy a room or a designated floor space. However, on Wednesday, Saravanan only said Act 446 would come into effect on Monday and employers had up to Aug 31 to comply with the new amendments.

He said the act would also enhance the 2018 guidelines for accommodation for foreign workers that were prepared by the Peninsular Malaysia Labour Department.

Saravanan also did not announce any SOP for the facilities, but agreed with medical health experts on the need for it.

He also said that the enforcement of the amendments, including the new rules to regulate the standard of housing and workers' facilities, would prevent the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic among migrants that were identified as a high-risk group.

Real Estate and Housing Developers' Association Malaysia

(Rehda) president Datuk Soam Heng Choon said in areas where alternative housing or land was not readily available, employers would need three to six months to fulfil the updated act's housing requirements.

He said the time was required as it was not easy to find land in the city to comply with the new spatial requirements, adding that construction developments were sometimes already too compact.

In response to rights groups saying that employers had been given sufficient time to work on the new housing facilities as the amendments were gazetted in September last year, Soam said the government had always given employers a notice period before implementing a law.

He said amid Covid-19, the development of clusters involving migrants could push the issue to the forefront, having been put on the backburner until recently.

Despite the short notice, Soam said employers were prepared to comply with the new rules.

"Time, however, is crucial for us to do a proper job. We are willing to do the necessary even though workers are not subjected to the same rule.



Some of the foreigners seen around Jalan Leboh Pudu in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. PIC BY ROHANIS SHUKRI

"They can continue to live in cramped and hazardous conditions in order to save on rental because they live on their own."

Soam also said Rehda and other

groups that recruited migrants were seeking to engage the authorities to iron out the issue as well as other matters relating to the industry.