

FOOD BANK

LET'S ALL HELP TO FEED THE POOR

Mosques, temples and churches should come together for this purpose

ESSELANG



ROHIMAN HAROON

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Thinking that he might take the leftovers to feed himself, I approached this 19-year-old Indian boy and asked whether he had eaten. He shook his head and



Student volunteers take stock of food items in the on-campus food bank at Universiti Sains Malaysia, George Town. The success of food bank initiatives requires more than institutional assistance; it needs the human touch of volunteers. PIC BY DANIAL SAAD

NEW SUNDAY TIMES

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TARIKH : 1/12/2019
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replied: "No, Uncle."

Then I asked him to sit with me and bought him a plate of fried rice with fried chicken. He said there had been times when he did not eat for days on end and had no clue where to get the next morsel of food.

He had no money, not even spare change to buy a bun. Sometimes, he and his friends would walk a few kilometres to the nearest Hindu temple near I-City for food.

His parents, odd-job labourers at a plantation in Banting, can afford to pay only for his room rental and tuition fees. He works part-time as a sales assistant at a shopping mall nearby but his income quickly dries up in mid-

month due to academic expenses.

This young man, like many of his peers in public universities, are mired in a host of issues, in particular getting enough calories daily to survive.

Sometimes, I can't believe this is happening in a country where we are talking about preparing youth for the 4.0 Industrial Revolution. These students need a balanced diet to get through hardship and better themselves.

It may sound exaggerated, but in reality the students are truly famished. They end up devouring instant noodles all the time and some resort to crime when they can't afford to buy food. I have read of students of higher

learning institutions stealing and robbing merely to feed themselves.

The problem is that there are no or not enough soup kitchens in places where some of these universities are located and there are no food banks in areas where the students live. They have to fend for themselves and do whatever it takes to survive.

We are glad that the food bank programme initiated by the Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Ministry is proving successful in some urban universities. This programme needs to be expanded rapidly to help students in state-owned universities and universities that have branches all over the country.

It was initiated in the two most highly-populated universities, namely University Malaya and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia this year.

In March, Datuk Seri Saifuddin Nasution had announced that the programme would cover 20,000 students in 20 public universities by year end. I wonder whether it is still work in progress or the target group has already benefited.

The minister also said the initiative was gathering momentum with strong support from 430 supermarkets and hypermarkets

nationwide for the Food Bank Malaysia programme in the form of surplus raw material on a daily basis.

The programme is also aided by strategic partners like hotel associations and soup kitchens; Food Aid Association and Kechara prepare meals at their respective central kitchens while the logistics are taken care of by the ministry. The food bank initiative for students is an extension of the ministry's programme for the B40 group.

There is a pressing need for public help for the Food Bank Initiative. This programme needs more than just assistance from the government, supermarkets, hotels and soup kitchens. It needs volunteers and more volunteers.

The volunteers can canvass donations in cash or kind, they can run food collection centres or galvanise residents' associations, mosques, churches and temple members into running mini soup kitchens for poor students.

Our country has thousands of mosques, temples and churches that can come together to assist the students and the extreme poor.

Imagine if there is a massive movement among us to show kindness and compassion to the

needy, regardless of race and creed and even political beliefs.

Yes, this may be idealistic. To quote Albert Camus: "To be happy, we must not be too concerned with others." It is a herculean task to get moral support from people these days.

We have become a society that is self-centred. Even worse, there's always the suspicion when help is rendered, including suspicion among religious adherents.

But all is not lost.

I remember reading about a group of vehicle owners from Selangor who went into the deep recesses of Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang with food aid for the Orang Asli and neighbouring communities even before the state agencies could help them.

The same spirit was demonstrated by a Christian group when the worst-ever floods hit Kedah some years ago. They waded in knee-deep water to deliver food to the kampung folks, who were ecstatic about receiving them without any tinge of suspicion.

C'est la vie.

The writer is a former NST journalist, now a film scriptwriter whose penchant is finding new food haunts in the country

Let's all help to feed the poor



By Rohiman Haroon
December 1, 2019 @ 12:10am

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