

18 December 2007

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 18 (Bernama) -- The year 2007 is indeed a trying year for the consumers. Apart from the rising cost of living, there are other issues over consumer products and services that have raised a great deal of concern among the Malaysian public.

Bernama's journalist, Melati Mohd Ariff met with the president of the Malaysian Association of Standards Users, Datuk N. Marimuthu, who is also the Federation of Malaysian Consumers Association (Fomca) president, recently to talk over several issues confronting the Malaysian consumers.

The following is the text of the interview between Melati and Marimuthu:

1. How would you view the safety status of consumer products and services based on the work of your association in 2007?

MARIMUTHU: We have been working very hard to promote the importance of safety standards for products and services offered to consumers. This year has been a very challenging year indeed. You can even perhaps call this year as the year with the most safety issues and incidences with regards to consumer products and services.

2. Why do you say that?

MARIMUTHU: We have seen hundreds of our school children falling victim to food poisoning in schools. Food prepared in canteens and milk supplied for the school children nutritional programme has been tainted. Imported food stuffs and cosmetic products repeatedly violate our regulations. Poor consumer alert system and recall measures, simply allow consumers to be exposed to unsafe products and services. Then we have the problem with toys. Did you notice that both affect the vulnerable group of consumers, like children? To this date, the toy safety regulations has not been implemented. Even after numerous letters, memorandums and meetings with the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumers Affairs (MDTCA). Even after we detected the lead metal elements in toy samples taken from several hypermarkets and supermarkets and got the findings published in the media. We do not know what else that we need to do to get the authorities to get into action and rid the shelves of dangerous toys. We are not privy to information if the tests have been carried out on the toys which are imported by Malaysian companies.

3. Toys have really been a cause of concern. Can you tell us more on the findings of the tests carried out on the toys?

MARIMUTHU: We sampled 24 toys at random from different hypermarkets, supermarkets and toy stores around Kuala Lumpur, Petaling Jaya and Seremban. We then used a Lead Detection Kit to detect the presence of the metal in the paints used for the toys and almost all the toys tested indicated the presence of lead. We need to know how much lead is present and the lead detection kit cannot tell us precisely how much. The determination tests must be carried out by authorised agencies so that the tests are considered valid and independent.

4. Are there any other concerns with regards to consumer safety issues?

MARIMUTHU: I really need to share with you the safety concerns with regards to healthcare services. The loss of a baby's arm due to negligence by a doctor has been reported in the media and this is not the first time such a case occurred. Justifying the rate of mistakes of three to five percent in Malaysia is acceptable by the Minister concerned and lashing out at the victims only aggravates the problem. The root cause of the safety incidences among patients under the care of

hospitals has to be the top priority. Statistics will not give confidence.

 Only a string of actions to ensure safety and encourage a healing environment for the patients will regain the confidence among healthcare systems. This is the social responsibility of the healthcare personnel and the policy makers. How can the healthcare system be a threat to healthcare?

<u> 5. What needs to happen to at least indicate we are on the right path to improve safety of consumer products and services?</u>

MARIMUTHU:

 We need to overhaul regulations and laws related to safety of consumer products and services. The laws must allow the use of voluntary standards so that the standards can be used to control marketing of unsafe products. There is already a provision in the Consumer Protection Act 1999 for the Minister to make safety standards mandatory. But as in the case with toys, the bureaucracy is hampering the efforts. We need provisions which will allow the use of voluntary safety standards to safeguard consumers from unsafe products and services. We need improvement in the infrastructure in the public health department to obtain injury data due to the use or consumption of products and use of services.

<u> 6. What is the significance of those data?</u>

MARIMUTHU:

 Right now we do not know how serious are injury incidences due to toys. In the United States data on injury and accidents are obtained and organisations like the US Public Interest Research Group (USPIRG) released an annual report on toy and other children's products related-incidents.

 They have been doing that for more than a decade. We are also not getting valuable data on food poisoning incidences unless it happens in institutions like student or university hostels. Did you know that the general practitioners are not obliged to report food safety incidences to the authorities? Do you know who to report to if you yourself suffer from food poisoning?

<u> 7. So, having said all that, can you briefly tell us what are your expectations for 2008.</u>

MARIMUTHU:

 There are seven things we would like to see to happen for 2008 and beyond.

 Firstly, we would like the relevant laws related to consumer protection especially with regards to consumer products have an integrated system to gather injury and accident data.

 Secondly, we also realised that the enforcement and also the related ministries need to enhance human capability since consumer issues are not only price and availability of products. Consumer issues have evolved into very technical issues like genetically modified food, chemical contamination (banned substances) in food and healthcare products. Now we are going into nanotechnology and this will add to the insurmountable concerns we already have for consumers.

 Thirdly, there is also pressing need to enhance accessibility to products and services which are produced or offered respectively with minimum impact on the environment. This itself is a humongous task for all, such that the government, industries and consumers.

 Fourthly, we really have to look into improving accessibility of services to people with disabilities. Although our building by-laws have provisions to make public buildings accessible to people with disabilities, even government agencies are not complying with those requirements. We have to bear in mind that the proportion of Malaysians aged above 60 is expected to be more than double from seven per cent of the total population in the year 2000 to 16 per cent in 2020, according to a recent statement by the Deputy Governor of Bank Negara. The elderly will have similar needs to people with disabilities.

 The fifth thing that we would like to see is that government and private bodies engage consumer organisations to have aggressive consumer education programmes in their related field or work. We have seen the failure of the 'Tak Nak', 'Love Our River' and 'Recycling' campaigns. Since consumer organisations have better outreach, results

can be seen sooner rather than later.

 The sixth expectation is that, the media which is a very powerful in influencing the people's mindset, to engage in educating the public on product safety and environmental conservation. The New York Times has topics on consumer safety issues online and always highlights recalls and other safety issues.

 Lastly, we would like to see all organisations embrace the idea that consumer safety issues are beyond legal compliance and it is their social responsibility to ensure that they have taken ALL efforts to ensure products and services are safe.

<u> 8. Last but not least, do you have any advice for the Malaysian consumers for 2008 or for the future perhaps</u>?</u>

 MARIMUTHU:

 Yes, definitely. You see consumers need to be proactive in the decision making. We are all consumers and we have to exercise all our eight rights which are the rights to safety, rights to be heard, rights to be informed, rights to satisfy our basic needs, rights to healthy environment, rights to redress, rights to consumer education and rights to choose.

 Please use all the provisions and infrastructure to voice your grievances. You know that we have a National Consumer Complaints Centre (NCCC) which managed more than 18,000 complaints last year and we hope consumers will use this centre and others like the complaints in handling in MDTCA and the Public Complaints Bureau to ensure that their grievances are heard.

 If consumers do not voice their grievances and put in record, we cannot build a case to justify change in policy, laws or administration system.

 The internet is a powerful tool and anything is accessible, so please use the e-aduan of NCCC where you can lodge a complaint from your home/office or even wherever your can get wireless broadband services. Alternatively there is the telephone, fax and walk- ins to attend to complaints at NCCC. Through the complaints received we can identify important safety Issues which need to be addressed.

<u> 9. Any final words before we end this interview?</u>
</div><p class="MsoNormal">
 MARIMUTHU:

 Yes, self protection is the Best Protection.

 -- BERNAMA</p><p class="MsoNormal">by Melati Mohd Ariff</p> <p class="MsoNormal"></p> <p> </p><p style="font-size: 8pt; font-family: Verdana" align="justify"> </p><h5 style="font-size: 8pt; font-family: Verdana"> </h5>