

# Keeping the lid on prices

LAST week, the Domestic Trade, Cooperatives and Consumerism Ministry placed 21 consumer items under the Festive Season Price Control Scheme in conjunction with the coming Aidilfitri celebration.

The prices will be in force for 17 days from July 7 to July 23, which is two days more than last year, to curb unreasonable price increases.

This scheme has been in place since 2000 with protecting consumers against any act of profiteering by irresponsible traders as its main objective.

Under this scheme, a number of goods that are essential during festive seasons, such as Hari Raya Aidilfitri, Chinese New Year, Deepavali, Christmas, *Pesta Kaamatan* and *Hari Gawai*, are identified as price-controlled goods where their maximum selling price will be determined according to areas and districts for a specified period.

This scheme is enforced throughout Malaysia at the producer, wholesaler and retailer levels.

Now that the scheme is in place, it is crucial for the relevant authorities to monitor the situation constantly in order to prevent irresponsible traders from taking advantage to hike prices and cause financial hardship to consumers.

The relevant agency can fully use and enforce the existing legislation, the Price Control and Anti-Profiteering Act 2011 (Act 723).

Section 14 of the Act clearly states that any person who, in the course of trade or business, "profiteers" in selling or offering to sell or supplying or offering to supply any goods or services commits an offence.

Under the Act, the word "profiteer" means making unreasonably high profit.

The Act stipulates that any person who commits any offence

under such a situation, on conviction shall be liable (a) where such person is a body corporate, to a fine not exceeding RM500,000 and, for a second or subsequent offence, to a fine not exceeding RM1mil; or (b) where such person is not a body corporate, to a fine not exceeding RM100,000 or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding three years or to both and, for a second or subsequent offence, to a fine not exceeding RM250,000 or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years, or to both.

After the scheme is announced, traders are also required to put up special pink price tags for each of the price-controlled items. Failure to do so will render the trader a fine of up to RM10,000 or compound up to RM5,000 for individuals or a maximum fine of RM20,000 or compound of RM10,000 for companies.

Consumers themselves can also

take their own initiative by reporting any suspicious act of profiteering by traders to the relevant authorities. Consumer should use their power by boycotting the irresponsible traders as well. It is also crucial for the consumers to keep all the transaction receipts to be used as future evidence.

The Domestic Trade, Cooperatives and Consumerism Minister and the NGO consumer groups must consistently work together to find ways to prevent traders from manipulating issues about price hikes.

Surprise checks and ground visits to business centres or markets should be conducted regularly to send a strong signal to all traders that they are being monitored and so they must act within the law when doing business.

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