

TheStar
SAYS

No sweet situation for sugar industry

WE often think of sugar as the stuff that helps make desserts, confectionery and soft drinks so hard to resist. But it is more to us than a source of sweetness; it is also a source of energy, and an important one, according to the sugar companies, if taken in moderation.

Whether or not we are careful about our consumption of sugar, an increase in its price has an impact on our cost of living because so much of our food contains sugar.

Naturally, we get prickly when there is a chance that sugar will cost more. This was the case recently, when it was reported that MSM Malaysia Holdings Bhd, the country's leading sugar refiner, had appealed to the Government to

increase the retail ceiling price of refined sugar by 20% to 30%.

The listed company said it was hampered by the higher costs of raw sugar and gas, and by the weakened ringgit.

Domestic Trade, Cooperatives and Consumerism Minister Datuk Seri Hanzah Zainuddin subsequently said there had been discussions on this matter for about a month and the ministry was studying the prices of sugar in the global market.

According to reports yesterday, he announced that the ceiling prices stayed the same for the two types of sugar whose prices are controlled – coarse and fine sugar.

At the same time, we learnt that MSM Malaysia had increased by up

to 30% the prices of its premium products such as caster, icing, brown and soft brown sugar.

This may not be the end of the story. If the sugar producers continue to face mounting costs, we can expect a renewed request for a price hike. And that will trigger another round of anxiety among consumers and businesses that rely on sugar as an ingredient.

Sugar may seem simple to most of us, but the factors that determine its prices in Malaysia are not.

The sugar refinery business here is a duopoly, that is, a monopoly with two players instead of one.

Part of the Felda Global Ventures Holdings Bhd group, MSM Malaysia claims almost two-thirds of the domestic sugar market. The other

dominant player is Central Sugars Refinery Sdn Bhd, a subsidiary of Tradewinds (M) Bhd, another listed company.

With such a structure, security of supply can be an issue. The country cannot afford either of the companies to collapse under the burden of rising costs; in a sense, they are too big to fail.

But should that be the case?

For many years, the consumer associations have argued that there should be more local sugar refiners. The idea here is that with more competition, the market forces will keep prices low.

Of course, things are more complicated than that, but surely now is a good time to evaluate the possibility of opening up the industry

to others.

Also, how big a role should the Government have in the sugar market? The removal of the sugar subsidy in November 2013 has affected the two refiners but some relief came last March, when the Government stopped approving the import of refined sugar.

Consumers and businesses want stability in the price and supply of sugar, but ensuring this is always a challenge because market distortions can be costly.

Ultimately, we value transparency and reasonableness. If the producers insist that higher prices are necessary, they need to convince us that it is with sound justification, and not to compensate for the inadequacies of others.

An improved report card

Nation's maths and science performance up from 2011

PUTRAJAYA: Malaysians are improving at mathematics and science, according to the latest report by an international agency.

According to the Trends in International Mathematics and Science (TIMSS) 2015 report, Malaysia scored 465 in mathematics and 471 in science, a significant improvement from 2011, when it was 440 and 426 respectively.

The report was released by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA).

The 2011 score placed the country below the international average, and was a regression from the 2007 score of 474 for mathematics and 471 for science.

"I am pleased as this is a positive sign," Education Ministry director-general Tan Sri Dr Khair Mohamad Yusof told a press conference yesterday, after the release of the survey result which comes in a four-year cycle.



Marked improvement: Dr Khair Mohamad showing the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study report for 2015 during the press conference in Putrajaya.

TIMSS is a large-scale survey conducted to give an international overview on the teaching and learning of mathematics and science so that participating countries can make informed decisions about educational policy and practice.

"I hope it will be a stepping stone for us to achieve our goals of scoring 500 points for both maths and science in TIMSS 2019, and to evaluate ourselves into the top third of countries participating in international assessments like the Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa) and TIMSS by 2025 as mentioned in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025.

"The international benchmarking of studies is necessary as it provides an input for the improvement of our national education," he added.

First conducted in 1995, TIMSS assesses fourth (Year Four) and eighth grade (Form Two) students around the world on curriculum content shared by participating countries.

Malaysia has been participating in this exercise since 1999 by allowing its Form 2 students to be assessed by the IEA, which in turn is directed by the TIMSS International Study Centre at Boston College of the United

States in collaboration with the network of organisations and representatives from participating countries.

The tests contain multiple choice and structured subjective questions, and are carried out in the main language of instruction in the respective countries.

With this better showing, Malaysia has improved in ranking, with the country now at 22nd and 24th for mathematics and sci-

Dealing with Dr Mahathir one of Umno's four challenges

TUN Dr Mahathir Mohamad is one of four challenges Umno needs to deal with firmly, said party treasurer Datuk Seri Dr Salleh Said Keruak.

The other three challenges are the attacks against Umno, wooing the younger generation and maintaining party unity.

Speaking at a Media Information

Convention here, Salleh, who is Communication and Multimedia Minister, said party members must deal with Dr Mahathir as Umno's political enemy.

"We must make sure the rakyat are not influenced by his speeches at *ceramah* and interviews," he said.

Salleh said the former prime minister was now cooperating with the DAP and Opposition, and was working against the party's struggle and country's social contract agreed on since Independence.

He pointed out that Umno recorded its best performance during the

2004 general election when Dr Mahathir left the party, winning 109 parliamentary seats, a gain of 32 from the previous one.

However, Barisan Nasional lost its two-thirds majority in the next general after Dr Mahathir attacked his successor Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

RM5 combo meals at special cafeteria



UMNO
General Assembly
2016

Nov 29 – Dec 3

A RM5 cafeteria has been set up to cater to delegates and visitors at the Putra World Trade Centre (PWTC) during the Umno general assembly. All the combo meals on its menu such as *nasi campur*, *roti canai*, burgers, muffins, drinks and desserts are priced at RM5.

Those who ate there yesterday attested to the taste and serving size. PWTC chief executive officer Shamsul Kamar Ahmad said its management team decided to open the cafe following a request from the Umno organising committee in view of the rising cost of living.

"It is called the RM5 Cafeteria because we have delicious combo meals with dessert and drinks for just RM5," he told reporters yesterday.

The cafe will operate until Saturday when the general assembly ends.

Shamsul Kamar said the PWTC management began preparing for the general assembly about two months ago.

A team of chefs, he said, would be cooking a total of 148,385 dishes for the five-day assembly.

It was about 137,000 dishes last year.

This year's menu involves 5,800kg of rice, 800kg of flour, 500kg of sugar, 4,580kg of beef, 2,000kg of mutton, 6,500kg of chicken and 5,000kg of fish, among others.

About 80% of the menu would comprise traditional Malay dishes such as *ayam masak hitam utara*, *gambus percek*, *dagang masak kulai*, *ikan tenggiri asan pedas* and *sambal udang petai*.

Shamsul Kamar said the mammoth task involved 318 full time staff and at least 1,000 part-time volunteers.

"This does not include 334 police and 50 Fire and Rescue Department personnel, 40 officers from the Civil Defence Department and 30 medical officers," he said.

He also noted that a WiFi system with a speed of 250Mbps was provided for the delegates.