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Census and sensibility

THE Great Count began yesterday, with nearly 30,000 census officers fanning out across the country in an RM200 million, seven-week exercise to piece together each individual pixel of the big picture of this nation. This is the fifth Population and Housing Census of Malaysia, continuing what has turned out to be an indispensable exercise instituted at the birth of the nation. India's similar legacy is today seeing the largest such exercise in history, with a million census-takers enumerating a population of some 1.3 billion. What emerges from these exercises is a detailed snapshot of a nation based on facts, as opposed to the extrapolated trends, estimates and running statistics that constitute a nation's day-to-day sense of itself. Malaysia's census is a reality check taken every 10 years, providing a most useful inventory report on this nation's society and demographics.

It's not just a numbers game — the size of the population can be gleaned accurately enough from National Registration Department statistics. The census wants to know lifestyles, incomes and social realities as well. Hence, the involvement of agencies from the Information, Communication and Culture Ministry, Department of Orang Asli Affairs, Federal Territories and Urban Wellbeing Ministry and federal task forces on illegal immigrants. Census 2010 will attempt to count everyone here, as chief statistician Datuk Wan Ramlah Wan Abdul Raof has emphasised: "Even a homeless man living under a bridge or an addict in an abandoned building." But the approach will switch from "*de facto*", wherein everyone is counted regardless of citizenship, origin or transit status, to "*de jure*", which will include non-citizens resident here for at least six months.

Census 2010 will also need to accommodate the most definitive societal change since these counts began: mobility. Families have fragmented; many people live and work in places other than their registered domiciles. Citizens travelling or resident abroad will also have to be factored in. Modern technology will, therefore, play a key role in this exercise — census questionnaires may be submitted online, easing the burdens of count-takers. These 30,000 officers have their work cut out for them, however, and we trust they will receive the fullest cooperation from all. They've been trained in communication skills and interview techniques; we hope they will not also have to handle too many angry dogs, aggressive householders and recalcitrant individuals. Public cooperation is the key to keeping this enormous exercise as viable and useful as it has always been to this country.