

TOP GLOVE RIDES STORMS WITH CONFIDENCE

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Lim with his 35- year-old son Jin Feng, who has been working for Top Glove for 10-11 years.

TOP GLOVE Corporation Bhd, the world's largest rubber glove manufacturer, had been on top of the world for months last year after the unexpected deadly Covid-19 pandemic catapulted the company's earnings through the roof. But since last July, the homegrown multinational company has been shaken by continual negative news linked to poor labour treatment that has dented the reputation of the group and its management. This has also caused the record high share price of the fundamentally strong company to sink below analysts' target prices. Labour activists reportedly funded by the West have been making allegations linked to ethical trade and labour practices against Top Glove. However, to the credit of the company, it acted promptly by hiring labour consultants to correct the wrong and longstanding practices – legacies from its SME (small/medium enterprise) days.

Top Glove's Malaysia-made gloves have been banned in the United States on alleged "forced labour" charges. Though seen as ridiculous to many in the Malaysian context, Top Glove chose to do the necessary. Last Monday, it announced that all International Labour Organisation's 11 indicators of 'forced labour' have been resolved and verified. The group's founder and executive chairman Tan Sri Dr Lim Wee Chai, who had previously kept a low profile, has been forced to meet the media to improve his personal and company's image. "As we are the world's largest manufacturer of rubber gloves, naturally migrant worker activists such as Andy Hall looking for targets aimed at us. But now he has become our friend – a 'critical friend' (a friend who can criticise) – after witnessing tremendous improvements in our treatment of workers," Lim says in an exclusive interview with Sunday Star at his office at Top Glove Tower. Surprisingly, the 63-year old tycoon harbours no ill-feelings against Hall after his "malicious attacks" on Top Glove last year. "We are learning. We do not want to create enemies. We want to make friends with everybody, say good things and do good things," states the devout Buddhist, a student of Master Cheng Yen

of Tzu Chi of Taiwan along with his wife.

Hall's charges last July spurred Top Glove to allocate funds to improve the living conditions of its foreign workers, subsidise their meals and raise their wages. Last month, the group gave out special bonuses to the workers, says Lim. In fact, this writer was given a guided tour of the workers' accommodation before the interview. Both link houses and ats in Shah Alam are installed with facilities to provide a safe and decent living place, and to facilitate workers to repatriate money back to their home countries. This writer was also shown a short and medium plan of Top Glove to improve the living conditions of its migrant workers further. Besides Hall, Impactt – an independent consultant specialising in ethical trade, human rights and labour practices – has also been won over. In a January statement, Impactt opined findings show “forced labour indicators were no longer present among the group's direct operations”. The attention given to labour issues by Lim was shown in a letter he penned to its 21,000 staff and workers dated April 19: “As Top Glove's executive chairman, it is my responsibility to put right the wrongs.

I have been personally chairing daily meetings to correct shortfalls relating to workers' welfare for the last nine months.” Calling employees “the children and asset” of the company, he stated in the letter: “I am confident that we will continue to live up to the highest of standards with compassion and humility.” While some believe the industrialist's problems with the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) could be due to his perceived pro-China stance amid US-China tension, Lim is not so sure. When Wuhan became the first epicentre of the Covid-19 pandemic in February last year, the group – with business in China – promptly flew three million gloves to Beijing. The gesture of Top Glove and donors from other Malaysian Chinese groups were highlighted in the media.