

U E209 AAE
MAHATHIR-BIDONG
BM

ALOR SETAR, APRIL 24 (BERNAMA) -- MALAYSIA WILL PROVIDE AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE VIETNAMESE REFUGEES IN PULAU BIDONG, TERENGGANU, BEFORE IMPLEMENTING ITS DECISION TO CLOSE THE TRANSIT CAMP ON THE ISLAND, PRIME MINISTER DATUK SERI DR MAHATHIR MOHAMAD SAID TODAY.

THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT 'WOULD DISCUSS FURTHER WITH THE TERENGGANU GOVERNMENT AND INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES BEFORE GOING AHEAD WITH ITS DECISION ON THE CLOSURE OF THE CAMP, HE SAID.

THE QUESTION OF CLOSING THE ISLAND TO REFUGEES WAS NOT AN EASY MATTER +LIKE CLOSING AND OPENING THE DOOR+ AND THE GOVERNMENT WOULD HAVE TO MAKE A THOROUGH STUDY OF IT, THE PRIME MINISTER TOLD REPORTERS BEFORE LEAVING FOR KUALA LUMPUR.

HE AND DATUK SERI DATIN PADUKA DR SITI HASMAH ALI HAD JOINED IN BREAKING OF THE FAST AT KAMPUNG KANDIS MOSQUE NEAR HERE LAST NIGHT.

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MINISTER IN THE PRIME MINISTER'S DEPARTMENT DATUK DR YUSOF NOOR ANNOUNCED PLANS LAST THURSDAY TO CLOSE THE ISLAND TO THE VIETNAMESE ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS.

HE HAD SAID THE FEDERAL CABINET HAD MADE THE DECISION FOLLOWING APPEALS FROM THE LOCAL PEOPLE WHO WANTED THE ISLAND AS A CENTRE FOR FISHING.

PULAU BIDONG, ABOUT 50 NAUTICAL MILES OFF KUALA TERENGGANU, HAS BEEN A PROHIBITED AREA SINCE THE 1970S WHEN IT WAS TURNED INTO A TRANSIT CAMP FOR VIETNAMESE ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS.

ASKED TO COMMENT ON FRUIT-GROWING, DATUK SERI DR MAHATHIR SAID FRUIT-GROWING EFFORTS WERE NEITHER FULLY SUCCESSFUL NOR A COMPLETE FAILURE.

HE URGED THE PEOPLE TO UNDERTAKE FRUIT-GROWING ON AN ESTATE BASIS AS WAS BEING DONE FOR RUBBER AND OIL PALM.

ONLY A SMALL GROUP OF PEOPLE WERE INTERESTED IN CULTIVATING FRUITS ON AN ESTATE BASIS WHILE MANY OTHERS WERE GROWING THEM IN SMALLHOLDINGS, HE SAID. -- MORE

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DATUK SERI DR MAHATHIR SAID SMALL-SCALE PRODUCTION OF FRUITS WAS NOT PROFITABLE AND WOULD NOT BE ABLE TO MEET THE NEEDS OF THE EXPORT MARKET.

HE SAID LOCAL FRUITS SUCH AS RAMBUTANS, MANGOSTEENS, DURIANS AND GUAVA HAD THE POTENTIAL FOR LARGE-SCALE CULTIVATION.

NEW ZEALAND, FOR EXAMPLE, HAD SUCCEEDED IN POPULARISING +CHINESE GOOSEBERRY+ WHICH WAS NATIVE TO CHINA BUT WAS NOT POPULAR THERE, HE SAID.

DATUK SERI DR MAHATHIR SAID NEW ZELAND HAD UNDERTAKEN LARGE-SCALE CULTIVATION OF THE FRUIT AND HAD CHANGED ITS NAME TO +KIWI FRUIT+ AND THE FRUIT WAS NOW POPULAR THE WORLD OVER. -- BERNAMA
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