

PM: We'll seek another solution for Viets

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By P.K. POH

ALOR STAR, Sun. — Malaysia will seek an alternative solution for the Vietnamese refugees before closing down the Pulau Bidong camp, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The Prime Minister did not say what the solution would be but added that "it is not a mere question of opening and closing our doors (to the boat people)."

"It is our intention to shut down the refugee camp but we are not closing it down just like that," he told reporters at the Kepala Batas airport before leaving for Kuala

Lumpur. He was here to attend a "breaking fast" ceremony at Masjid Kampung Kandis last night.

Dr Mahathir said the matter had to be studied thoroughly and an alternative would have to be sought first.

"We will have to hold discussions with the relevant international bodies, the Terengganu Government and others," he added.

There are about 5,000 Vietnamese boat people in Pulau Bidong which was made a refugee camp 10 years ago.

The Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Datuk Dr Yusof Noor, had said on Thursday that Malaysia would give Vietnam and

other parties concerned one year to stop the "boat people" from coming to the country, and to re-settle those already here.

He said Pulau Bidong would no longer be used as a refugee camp after the one-year was up.

On Friday, Deputy Foreign Minister Toh Muda Datuk Dr Abdullah Fadzil Che Wan said refugees would be turned away from Malaysia once the one-year deadline was set. He said Malaysia could not longer afford to be saddled with the problem.

Vietnamese Vice-Foreign Minister Tran Quang Co said at the end of his four-day visit to Malaysia last week that "it is a delicate matter involving many sides."