

PM: Boat people not turned away

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. — Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today said that the Government was not aware of any protest by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) that Malaysia had been towing away Vietnamese boat people from its waters.

The Prime Minister also denied that such incidents were taking place.

He said the people could see for themselves how Pulau Bidong, off Terengganu, is teeming with refugees.

Pulau Bidong is the main refugee holding centre before the refugees are sent to Sungai Besi for processing for resettlement in third countries.

Dr Mahathir said if the allegation was true, it was impossible for a boat-load of Vietnamese refugees, who landed in Kelantan yesterday, to have been taken in by the authorities.

He said that as far as the boat people issue was concerned, it was not only the countries of first asylum which had responsibilities.

"Let me remind the third countries that we are only temporary asylum countries for the boat people. They (third countries) have to live up to their promise of taking in these people. And it is not just taking in the good ones and leaving the rest behind."

He was replying to questions after chairing a meeting of Barisan Nasional

leaders at the Putra World Trade Centre.

A *Reuter* report from Jakarta yesterday, quoting a UNHCR spokeswoman, claimed that some Vietnamese people had been towed to sea by Malaysia and were now seeking sanctuary in Indonesia.

"The whole thing is getting out of hand," said the spokeswoman, adding that the Geneva-based UNHCR had lodged a protest with Malaysia for reportedly turning away refugees.

This is the second time that the Jakarta UNHCR office had alleged that Malaysia was denying sanctuary to boat people.

Last year, Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Ghafar Baba had denied a similar allegation, saying that not

all boat people who entered Malaysian waters sought sanctuary.

"Some wanted food, water and other supplies before resuming their search for temporary asylum in other countries," he had said.

On whether Malaysia would be a signatory to the International Cocoa Council Agreement (ICCA), Dr Mahathir said the Cabinet had not received a formal proposal.

"We will make a decision when we have such a proposal before us," he said.

Several calls had been made to Malaysia to be a signatory to the ICCA in view of its position as one of the world's leading producers of the commodity.