

Dr M: We won't force Acehnese out

By WONG CHUN WAI

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia will not force a group of 43 Acehnese camping at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) building here to return to Indonesia.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday if the Acehnese feared for their safety and did not want to return, the Government could not forcibly send them home.

However, he said, the Indonesian Government had given the assurance that they would not be oppressed if they returned home.

The group comprising 25 men, five women and 13 children from Aceh province, northern Sumatra, had claimed they were fleeing from political oppression.

They have been camping at the UNHCR office since June, saying they wanted to be recognised as political refugees

and be given asylum.

They claimed they fled to escape fighting between Indonesian troops and separatists of the Aceh Merdeka movement.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia considered the group as illegal immigrants who should return home with the co-operation of Indonesia.

When asked whether the Acehnese were illegal immigrants and not political refugees as they had claimed, he replied: "For us, they are con-

sidered illegal immigrants."

On Wednesday, Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said Malaysia was prepared to make arrangements to send the Acehnese back if they desired.

He said although some time would be needed to make the arrangements, it would not pose a problem to Malaysia.

Abdullah said the UNHCR could visit the group for proof that they would not be oppressed in their country.