

PM: Government will proceed with repatria

Viet illegals stage

By Sa'odah Elias,
R.V. Veera,
Tony Emmanuel,
Sufi Yusoff
and N. Gunalan

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. — The 4,650 Vietnamese boat people being housed at the Sungai Besi transit camp broke out at dawn today and staged a demonstration along a highway nearby to protest their repatriation.

As police Federal Reserve Unit troopers were called in to prevent any untoward incident, a stand-off ensued which lasted till late this evening.

By 8pm, after a series of talks, most of the Vietnamese voluntarily returned to the camp. However, an hour earlier, the FRU had to use water cannons and tear gas to force a defiant group of about 800 into the compound.

In an immediate reaction, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad reiterated that the repatriation of the Vietnamese must go on, adding the Government had no choice "because third countries had reneged on their promise to take in these illegal immigrants".

"We realise they don't want to go back, but we can't accommodate them here," he told newsmen at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Subang where he was to welcome the Sultan of Selangor back from London.

Dr Mahathir, who is also the Home Minister, said it was unfair for Malaysia to continue shouldering the burden of sheltering the boat people as the United Nation's High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had agreed Malaysia was only a transit point for them.

He said the Government was willing to discuss the plight of the Vietnamese with the UNHCR representatives here. But, he made it clear that regardless of the outcome of these talks, they had to go.

Meanwhile, Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Rahim Nor, who was at the scene of today's incident to witness the operation, defended the move to restore order at the camp.

"Although I sympathise

with their plight, I have a job to do and public order is my main priority.

"There are proper channels to air their grievances, and this is not one of them. Even our citizens are not allowed to carry arms, what more the Vietnamese," he said.

The drama unfolded about 6am when the Vietnamese broke through the security fencing of the camp to vent their frustration and anger over a recent agreement between the UNHCR and the Vietnamese as well as the Malaysian Governments on the closure of the camp by Aug 31. Malaysia has been accommodating the boat people for 20 years.

Two conflicting versions of what triggered the mass exodus from the camp were offered by the Federal Task Force on Vietnamese illegal immigrants and the camp inmates.

According to the Vietnamese, they had been been up as early as 5.30am to continue with their protest against repatriation. (Camp residents have been holding demonstrations and hunger strikes since January to protest their repatriation).

But things started to get out of hand when they saw the arrival of several trucks of FRU men.

Nguyen Thien, chairman of the Vietnam Veterans Association, claimed policeman threatened to "suppress us with dogs, tear gas and riot police, because we've broken Malaysian law".

Following some tense moments, the inmates claimed the FRU fired tear gas, which led to panic and chaos.

Other camp residents were attracted by the commotion and soon joined the demonstrators, some of whom were armed with homemade knives made out of scrap metal and plastic piping, as they broke through the security fencing.

Task Force VII chief of staff Kapten Ibrahim Jawi said the FRU was called in today with the intention of ensuring no trouble broke out while a security fence was being put up to segregate the inmates.

□ PLEASE TURN TO

PAGE 2, COL 2

tion of boat people

protest

Riot police use water cannons to quell Viets

□ FROM PAGE ONE

"It was part of our strategy to curb unwanted social problems, especially involving unmarried Vietnamese women," he said, without elaborating.

Ibrahim denied the FRU used tear gas to stem the outbreak, but admitted they had used water cannons to disperse the Vietnamese as some were armed with sharp instruments.

The FRU subsequently withdrew before calling in reinforcements, he said, adding there were clashes between the inmates and the riot policemen.

After the breakout, most of the Vietnamese fanned out along the highway and in front of a plot of reserve land near the camp. It led to motorists slowing down, causing a massive jam.

Some of the Vietnamese

were just content to sit peacefully under sunhats and umbrellas or tree shades, while a group of about 50 men wearing headbands with the words "die for freedom", threatened mass suicide if they were attacked by police.

A 90-minute discussion which started at noon between the inmates, who were represented by three of their number, the UNHCR and the Task Force VII, did not convince the Vietnamese to return to the camp.

Instead, they went back to the camp, collected their personal belongings and pitched make-shift tents outside in the blistering sun.

At 3pm, another round of talks began with the arrival of the United States' Embassy First Secretary Louis Mazel. Signs of progress became evident when the

group that had earlier threatened to commit suicide started trooping in voluntarily about 5.30pm.

By 7pm, the majority of the Vietnamese who had escaped earlier in the day returned to the camp.

They agreed to return following a promise by UNHCR representative Erica Feller and Mazel of more talks regarding their fate.

"We agreed to have a dialogue on what is possible and what is not possible for them and they agreed to come back inside," said Mazel, adding "no promises were made".

By 6.45pm, after repeated warnings, the FRU moved in on about 800 Vietnamese stationed near the camp entrance with tear gas and water cannons. A total of 13 Vietnamese were injured and an assortment of weapons seized.

