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Mahathir-refugees

MALAYSIA FIRM ABOUT SENDING BACK THE VIETNAMESE REFUGEES

LANGKAWI, Jan 21 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today that the government is very firm about sending back the Vietnamese boat people from the Sungai Besi Transit Camp in Kuala Lumpur.

He said since the third countries had refused to accept them, then they would have to be sent home.

"The third countries have promised to take them off our hands but now they have refused to do so and if they have the right to refuse them, we also have the right to refuse the boat people," he said.

"We will be very firm and we will send them back somehow," he told reporters at the end of his two-day visit to this duty-free island resort.

Dr Mahathir said he could not be very specific about the method of sending the boat people back to their home country but stressed that it would be done.

The Prime Minister was commenting of Thursday's riot at the camp when scores of Vietnamese boat people set fire to one of the blocks after a clash with police which left 24 people including seven policemen injured.

One of the injured inmate died several hours after being treated at the Kuala Lumpur Hospital.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia could not tolerate people who come to the country and then create problems.

"We have sympathy for them (the boat people) but there is a limit to being sympathetic," he said.

Furthermore, he said they were not political refugees but just economic refugees.

Asked whether the refugees could be sent back by June 30, Dr Mahathir said he was unsure about that.

Task Force VII Director, Laksamana Muda Datuk Yaacob Daud was reported as saying that the refugees would be sent back by the said date.

He said the task force would exercise their right to ensure the voluntary repatriation programme (VRP) and orderly repatriation programme (ORP) could be carried out smoothly.

"If they do not wish to return home under the VRP, we will not hesitate to have them forcibly repatriated under the ORP," he was quoted as saying on Friday. -- Bernama