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Malaysia Airlines flies 121 home from Cambodia

IN an unannounced evacuation exercise, 121 Malaysians, including 11 infants, were airlifted from Phnom Penh last night on board a Malaysia Airlines 737-400. The evacuees, together with a four-member crew, arrived at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Airport at Subang at 9.20pm.

The aircraft left Phnom Penh's Pochentong international airport at 6.03pm (local time) following diplomatic clearance received from Cambodian Second Prime Minister Hun Sen at 2.15pm yesterday.

The evacuation was initiated by the Malaysian Government in collaboration with Malaysia Airlines, Wisma Putra officials said.

The aircraft, piloted by Captain Arthur J. Cantrill and co-piloted by Captain Chong Hin Loy, had a 30-minute stopover at the Sultan Ismail Petra Airport in Kota Baru for refuelling.

Another two flights out of the Cambodian capital are expected today. Some 200 Malaysians, including Malaysian Ambassador Kamal Ismaun, are still in Phnom Penh.

Officials of the Malaysian Embassy had on Monday met representatives of Malaysia Airlines and Royal Air Cambodge, and major investors like Technology Resources Industries and Petronas on the possibility of airlifting Malaysians out of Cambodia.

The exercise was mounted despite a slight damage to the right engine and the top of the aircraft which was probably caused by looters, Chong said.

"We were satisfied with the technical condition of aircraft and we believed that it was safe to fly out of the country," he added.

Most of the Malaysians, given shelter at several hotels, were prepared for the evacuation.

"They were at the airport between 4.00pm and 4.30pm. However, there was a delay of about 90 minutes because the Cambodian Immigration authorities insisted that the passengers be screened," he added.

Earlier yesterday, Acting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim said Asean is sticking to the original schedule for Cambodia's admission at the 30th Asean Ministerial Meeting in Kuala Lumpur at the end of this month.

However, the latest developments in Cambodia still need to be studied, he told reporters after chairing the Commonwealth Games Committee meeting.

Asean foreign ministers had agreed at their meeting six weeks ago in Kuala Lumpur to admit Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, the last three pieces in the Asean-10 jigsaw.

The ministers will meet in Kuala Lumpur tomorrow for an emergency session on the developments in Phnom Penh.

"We are monitoring the situation, and we have asked Wisma Putra to discuss with other Asean foreign ministries," he added.

Anwar said he has informed Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is on a two-month vacation since May 19, of the matter.

Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who is the chairman of the Asean Standing Committee, meanwhile called for an immediate ceasefire in Phnom Penh and for the co-Prime Ministers to resolve their differences peacefully.

Abdullah said Asean wants both sides to abide by the terms of the Paris Peace Accords.

The 1991 UN-brokered arrangement called for elections and participation of all four Cambodian factions, including the Khmer Rouge, in a neutral political environment free from armed conflict.

In a three-paragraph statement issued in Kuala Lumpur on behalf of Asean, Abdullah said:

"Asean is dismayed by and deeply regrets the unfortunate turn of events in Cambodia, resulting in the loss of innocent lives, both of Cambodian citizens and of foreigners.

In Jakarta, Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas said Asean plans to release a joint communique at the Kuala Lumpur meeting, calling for an "immediate ceasefire" and for the clashing factions "to solve their differences through dialogue."

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