

01/07/1997

Malaysia to review visa requirements

Hardev Kaur in Hong Kong

HONG KONG, Mon: Malaysia is to review its decision to impose visa requirements on Hong Kong citizens following the handing over of the territories to Beijing.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has agreed that the decision be reviewed, Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said. Abdullah said he spoke with Dr Mahathir last night.

Abdullah had earlier met with Malaysian businessmen, entrepreneurs and officials in Hong Kong and sought their views. He said the review will be undertaken as soon as possible and this has been agreed to Dr Mahathir.

Malaysia had announced on Friday that following the handover citizens of the Special Administrative Region (SAR) will have to apply for visas to visit Malaysia. There has been considerable discussions on this here just hours ahead of the historic handover ceremony.

Abdullah, who met the new Chief Executive of the SAR, Mr Tung Chee-hwa, stressed that Malaysia did not in any way intend to send any message or signal that it lacks confidence in the new Hong Kong. On the contrary, Malaysia is confident about Hong Kong's future under Tung.

He congratulated Tung on the birth of the new Hong Kong, saying that "Malaysia rejoices with you on the new-found independence from Britain."

The Malaysian commission here will be known as a consulate-general in keeping with the new SAR. The consul-general, Encik Zakaria Sulong, will continue to look after the Malaysian affairs in the SAR.

Last Friday, Zakaria said in an interview all Hong Kong visitors to Malaysia, including those holding British National Overseas Passports (BNOP), will be required to apply for visas after Hong Kong reverts to China on July 1.

He said, however, they will be given a three-month grace period until October 1 during which travel documents issued by the existing Hong Kong Government will continue to be recognised by Malaysian authorities.

Genuine businessmen will be given multiple-entry visas valid for 10 years to facilitate their travel to Malaysia, he added.

"The Malaysian Government has decided that visas will be imposed on all SAR passport holders who wish to visit Malaysia and it will be effective July 1, the day China resumes sovereignty over Hong Kong," he said.

Zakaria said the grace period was granted to allow the people of Hong Kong to obtain SAR passports. Most Hong Kong visitors currently enjoy visa-free entry into Malaysia.

He said the Chinese authorities were informed of the requirement last month. Currently, BNOP and British Dependent Territory Certificate (BDTC) holders have visa-free entry to Malaysia. Those holding Certificate of Identity (with more than seven years residence in HK) and Document of Identity (with residence of less than seven years in HK) are required to obtain visas beforehand.

Several other countries have said they will not recognise the BDTC from July 1. China does not recognise the BDTC which the British began issuing to certain persons after the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident. More than three million of Hong Kong's 6.3 million population are expected to apply for SAR passports. BNOP holders number 3.3 million.

Last year, 145,000 people from Hong Kong, mostly tourists, visited Malaysia, an increase of 135,000 from 1995.

In response to Zakaria's remarks, Hong Kong Immigration Director Regina

Ip said the Malaysian Government had not notified her personally of the ruling, according to the South China Morning Post.

"I am very disappointed. This is totally unjustified and unnecessary," said Ip who also promised to try to get the decision reversed..

"I do not think it is anything to do with immigration problems caused by our people but is purely symbolic because of the change of sovereignty," she added.

The report said this is believed to be the first time a country has decided to remove the visa-free facility after having granted it to BNOP holders.

Bernama reports: The Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Ja'afar and Raja Permaisuri Agong Tuanku Najihah congratulated Chinese President Jiang Zemin on the return of Hong Kong to China yesterday.

In a statement released by Wisma Putra in Kuala Lumpur Tuanku Ja'afar said: "Malaysia looks forward to continuing the close and friendly relations it has with the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China."

This, he said, would further enhance the overall relationship between Malaysia and China.

Acting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, in a message to Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng, said Malaysia welcomed the historic event which marked the end of more than 150 years of colonialism in East Asia.

Anwar is confident the existing traditional and friendly relations between Malaysia and Hong Kong, particularly in trade, investment and other areas of economic and social cooperation would continue to grow.

Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi also sent a similar message to his counterpart, Mr Qian Qichen, who is also China's Vice Premier.

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