

01/03/1997

Thailand to tighten issuance of transit visas

THAILAND has agreed to tighten issuance of transit visas to travellers in efforts to assist Malaysia overcome the problem of illegal entry through that country. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Thailand will stop issuing transit visas unless a traveller has concrete proof that he can proceed to third countries.

Thailand's commitment was given by its Prime Minister General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh during a meeting with Dr Mahathir yesterday.

"We know we will have problem if Thailand issues such a visa to those who cannot enter Malaysia. We have to send them back," Dr Mahathir told reporters in Kuala Lumpur after bidding farewell to Chavalit yesterday.

He noted that some foreign visitors had abused the transit visa given by the Thai authorities. "He (the visitor) asks for a transit visa, giving the impression that he can come to Malaysia when he cannot," he said.

The transit visa is issued by the Thai authorities to foreign visitors using that country as a transit point to other nations. Dr Mahathir said Thailand only gives the transit visa and it is up to the visitor whether or not to visit other places.

The issue surfaced following the influx of Bangladeshi immigrants who entered Malaysia illegally through Thailand after obtaining transit visas. With the latest development, foreign visitors must prove, among others, that they have travel tickets and money before they are given transit visas.

Last year, some 26,000 Bangladesh citizens who were awarded transit visas by Thailand tried to enter Malaysia illegally. They were refused entry and sent back to Thailand because of improper travel documents.

On plans for a tripartite meeting among Bangladesh, Thailand and Malaysia on the problem of Bangladeshi illegal immigrants in this country, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia had informed Bangladesh of the matter during the recent visit of its foreign minister.

Dr Mahathir added Chavalit had told him that he was happy with the two-day visit and described it as a "successful one". He (Chavalit) met a lot of our businessmen during the visit. From the Malaysian Government's perspective, we discovered that Thailand's new Government's stands are still the same," he added.

On the Malaysia-Thailand border demarcation issue, Dr Mahathir said he was told by Chavalit that he will try his best to settle it even though decision on such a matter in Thailand has to be brought to Parliament.

"While the border problem in Malaysia is resolved at Cabinet level, in Thailand it has to be tabled in Parliament for approval," he said.

Dr Mahathir said on the Malaysian side, the Malaysia-Thailand border problem can be resolved within 60 days.

Bernama reports: Senior Malaysian and Thai officials have begun talks to seek ways to resolve the problem of illegal entry of immigrants at the common border, Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said.

"They have started the preliminary rounds and will continue with further discussions to resolve this problem," he said after bidding farewell to Thai Prime Minister General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Airport in Subang. Chavalit was in Malaysia for a two-day visit.

Abdullah described the talks as a good development as it showed that immediate action had been taken even while the Thai Premier was still in Malaysia.

Recent news reports stated that over 30,000 illegal immigrants are on the Thai side of the border, awaiting to enter Malaysia.

Dr Mahathir, in his speech at a dinner he hosted for Chavalit last night, expressed Malaysia's appreciation of the Thai government's efforts to help solve the problem.

Abdullah said he reminded the Thai Foreign Ministry Permanent Secretary, Saroj Chavanaviraj, that Malaysia truly wanted to overcome the problem in 60 days as agreed to by both governments in their talks yesterday.

Abdullah described Chavalit's visit as most fruitful although he was here only for a brief period.

"A lot was achieved in his two days here, which goes to show that both leaders have good understanding," he added.

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