

03/03/1998

PM: Repatriation won't hurt ties (HL)

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PETALING JAYA, Mon. - Malaysia's move to send back illegal immigrants from neighbouring countries will not affect Asean solidarity, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

He said the Asean countries facing economic problems had agreed that it was the right of nations including Malaysia to repatriate people who tried to enter illegally.

"If we can help in the (countries') economic recovery, this, by itself, will reduce the number of cases of illegal entry," he said.

Last week, Dr Mahathir discussed with Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei the illegal entry of migrant workers from countries worst affected by the economic crisis.

Dr Mahathir, who is also Home Minister and chairman of the National Security Council, said Malaysia, which is also facing economic problems, could no longer accept illegal immigrants.

He was speaking to reporters after delivering a keynote address at the National Smart Partnership Dialogue 1998 at the Sunway Lagoon Resort Hotel.

Malaysia currently has 1.7 million foreign workers, most of whom had entered the country illegally but were legalised later.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia would step up patrols along the coastal areas to check the entry of illegals, particularly from Indonesia and Thailand.

Asked about reports that KL PRT Sdn Bhd, the developer of the Kuala Lumpur Monorail, was facing liquidity problems, Dr Mahathir said the Government would look into it.

"I don't think there is a problem. They can borrow money. Obviously, they have to borrow money. The Government will certainly look into their problem."

Dr Mahathir said he was confident that KL PRT could secure loans from banks," he said.

"The banks have money now and I am told that the interest rates have come down. They should be able to borrow money and carry on with the project."

The RM2 billion 16km-long project started in March last year and so far, work has been completed in Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman, Jalan Sultan Ismail, Jalan Imbi, Jalan Hang Tuah, Jalan Maharajalela and Jalan Sultan Sulaiman.

Dr Mahathir also said that Malaysia welcomed Taiwanese investments.

"What we need is more foreign investments and one of the things that Taiwan can do is to invest more in Malaysia. Taiwanese investments have been very big in the past and if they can invest more, we will be very happy," he said.

However, Dr Mahathir stressed that Malaysia had a one-China policy.

"As far as we are concerned, there is only one China, but we have always had good relations with Taiwan," he added.

Meanwhile, Army chief Jeneral Datuk Zahidi Zainuddin has given the assurance that there were enough soldiers to patrol the borders and coastal areas.

"There is no need to mobilise the 65,000-strong Territorial Army. We have the various security agencies looking after the country's borders and coastal areas, and it is sufficient for now," he said.

Zahidi, who said this to newsmen at the Sungai Besi camp, was commenting on the call by Perlis Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim in Kangar

last Saturday that the Territorial Army should be mobilised to assist other government agencies nab foreigners attempting to enter the country illegally.

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