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PM: There was no violation of human rights (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today the authorities involved in the repatriation of Indonesian illegals did not violate human rights when carrying out the exercise.

"As far as I am concerned, there is no violation (of human rights)," the Prime Minister told reporters after launching the "North Pole Freefall Expedition Malaysia 1998" at the Royal Malaysian Air Force base in Sungai Besi.

Dr Mahathir reiterated his earlier statement that the Government was sending back the illegals as it could not support them any longer.

Dr Mahathir, who is also Home Minister, was asked to comment on an AFP report from Jakarta today which quoted the Justice Minister Muladi as saying that the death of eight Indonesian illegal immigrants during a riot at the Semenyih Immigration Detention Centre last Thursday was a human rights violation.

However, Muladi said it was Malaysia's right to deport the illegals.

Dr Mahathir said he was unsure whether the report which quoted Muladi was accurate.

"That was what the news reports say. I can only comment if he says that to me directly."

The AFP report said international human rights groups have alleged that there had been use of force in the repatriation exercise involving thousands of Indonesian illegals.

The authorities shipped home another 1,133 Indonesians yesterday.

To another question, Dr Mahathir said as far as he knew the costs of repatriating the illegals were borne by Malaysia.

On Indonesia vice-president B.J. Habibie's suggestion yesterday that the cost of repatriation could be shared equally, Dr Mahathir who met Habibie this morning said the latter did not discuss the matter with him.

Eight Indonesians and a Malaysian policeman were killed while 38 policemen and dozens of Indonesians were injured in the violence, sparked by Indonesians from Aceh who were resisting deportation.

Meanwhile, Bernama quoted Dr Mahathir as saying that Indonesia had agreed to the deportation of its nationals who entered Malaysia illegally. Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, meanwhile, expressed regret over "negative" and "baseless" foreign reports on the Semenyih Detention Camp incident.

"This is not press freedom that is being practised. It is not that we cannot accept criticisms, but their reports must be accurate," he told reporters after opening the Gombak Umno divisional meeting in Kuala Lumpur today.

To another question, Abdullah added that the Government would not hand over the detention camps to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees as "we are not holding refugees but those who seek work illegally."

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