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Call for unconditional release of CPF funds

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THE Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) is against any attempt to link the Central Provident Fund (CPF) withdrawal with other issues such as the water supply to Singapore or the Customs, Immigration and Quarantine (CIQ) dispute.

MTUC president Senator Zainal Rampak, who is seeking a meeting with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on the issue, said the union wants no conditions attached to the withdrawal of CPF by contributors from Peninsular Malaysia who had left Singapore.

"I would like to remind the Singapore Government that the CPF issue is not collective bargaining.

"The contributions to the CPF are the workers' legal money; it is not right for the Singapore Government to hold on to it," he said in an interview with Business Times.

Zainal was referring to the package deal which is currently under negotiations between Dr Mahathir and Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong.

The deal comprises several issues affecting both countries, which the leaders seek to resolve in a package and not separately.

Apart from the CIQ facilities issue, the package also includes Singapore's request for water and the use of Malaysian airspace for Singapore Air Force jets.

It also includes Malaysia's request for the withdrawal of the CPF and the move by the Malaysian Government not to allow trading of shares in Singapore's Central Limit Order Book.

Zainal said he will meet Dr Mahathir before going ahead with his plan to lodge a complaint against Singapore to the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

During the meeting, he will consult the Prime Minister on the progress of the bilateral discussions, particularly on the CPF withdrawal issue. The "deadline" set by the congress for Singapore to act on the issue before it brings the case to the ILO was December 31 1998.

"As of now, I withhold the plan until I see the Prime Minister. Then, we will set another date to file the complaint," Zainal said.

According to him, the meeting with Dr Mahathir is important as the congress does not want to be an obstacle in high-level negotiations. The Prime Minister's office had acknowledged his intention to see Dr Mahathir but is yet to fix the date for the meeting.

Zainal, who sits in the ILO governing body, said the organisation is prepared to handle the complaint against Singapore.

"Many of my colleagues in the ILO believe that Singapore has no right to hold on to the money that belongs to Malaysians as they are not Singapore citizens," he said.

The MTUC seeks to file a case against the Singapore Government to the ILO committee on application of standards.

There is a provision under the ILO Convention which allows workers or unions to lodge complaints against any country which violates workers' rights.

Under Singapore's laws, workers from Peninsular Malaysia can only withdraw their CPF contribution after their retirement age of 55.

On the other hand, the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) Act had recently been amended to allow Singaporeans to withdraw their EPF if they leave

Malaysia.

The savings by Malaysians from the Peninsular who previously worked in various sectors in the republic is estimated to be worth about RM2.5 billion.

"We are talking about human rights here. The Malaysian workers have rights to their savings in the CPF," he said.

Zainal said he is concerned with the CPF issue as he has received not less than 10 calls every day from affected workers regarding the matter. Some of them also inquired whether they should hire a lawyer and bring the case to court.

"I told them to be patient as the Government is working on it. The MTUC is doing all it can to have the CPF contributions returned to the workers," he said.

Apart from going through the formal channels in the country, the MTUC has also utilised the union network by contacting its Singaporean counterpart, the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC).

In a show of support, the NTUC had forwarded MTUC's letter to Singapore Manpower Minister Lee Boon Yang, but no solutions emerged.

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