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Hamid-Haj

THREE TOUR AGENCIES FACE COURT ACTION OVER HAJ TRIPS

SEPANG, April 2 (Bernama) -- Legal action will be taken against three big tour agencies for by-passing the Pilgrims' Fund Board (Tabung Haji) in arranging Haj trips for Malaysian pilgrims.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Abdul Hamid Othman said the agencies committed the offence under the Tabung Haji Act which empowers only Tabung Haji to handle Haj pilgrims including obtaining Haj visas.

He said court action would also be taken against several small companies either for taking pilgrims to Mecca or failing to do so.

The Tabung Haji Act was enacted to protect Malaysians from being cheated as there were cases of tour agencies which had collected money but did not bring the pilgrims to the Holy Land, he told reporters upon returning from Mecca at the KL International Airport here today.

Dr Hamid said the government viewed seriously the activities of tour agencies bringing Malaysians to the Holy Land using Malaysian international passports but securing Haj visas through neighbouring countries.

He said the Act stipulates that all Haj pilgrimage-related transactions must be done with the Tabung Haji and companies could only offer packages to bring the pilgrims who have been given the approval and obtained Haj passports through Tabung Haji.

Haj pilgrims intending to go to the Holy Land under a specific package could only do so by enlisting the services of companies which were members of consortiums approved by Tabung Haji, he said.

There were six such consortiums and each of them have at least three tour agencies, said Dr Hamid, who was in Saudi Arabia for 11 days to perform the Haj and to monitor Tabung Haji operations.

He said Tabung Haji received many complaints on the way the private companies handled the pilgrims.

Some of them who went to Mecca under a private package encountered problems while in the Holy Land.

" Some had to sleep by the roadside and beside drains while in Mina while some were missing from their designated places of stay when Tabung Haji officials went to look for them," he said.

The pilgrims paid up to RM12,000 each to the companies for their trip, he said.

He also cited the difficulties faced to register the death and to arrange the funeral of a Malaysian pilgrim who died in Mecca four days before Hari Wukuf (the highlight of Haj pilgrimage).

The pilgrim had gone to the Holy Land using a Malaysian International passport but using a Haj visa from another country, he said.

Dr Hamid said the Saudi Arabia authorities encountered problems to handle the case because the deceased nationality was doubtful.

Haj visas were normally issued by the pilgrims' country of origin, he said.

He said Tabung Haji officials also detected Malaysian pilgrims wearing fake identification tags which were not issued by Tabung Haji.

Asked to comment on Tabung Haji's handling of the Haj pilgrimage this year, he said it was conducted smoothly and thanked the Saudi Arabia government for providing ample facilities particularly adequate transportation to ferry all the pilgrims at one go.

He said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir and his wife Datin Seri

Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, who performed the Haj this year, were the guests of King Fahd of Saudi Arabia.

He said Dr Mahathir also visited Malaysian pilgrims in Mina and those warded at the Tabung Haji hospital.

A total of 99 Malaysian pilgrims, many of whom above 60 years, died at the Holy Land this year as of yesterday, he added.

-- BERNAMA

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