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Indonesia should patrol exits

WE have many 'guests' in the country. The visitors we are concerned with are not tourists. Nor are they guest workers with permits and travel documents. Rather, they are the unwelcome immigrants of whom Indonesians are the biggest lot. No one has an official tally; but the number is large, very large, running into few hundred thousands. The good times over the past three decades have been a powerful magnet to those who came in search of a better fortune and livelihood on our shores.

And they came in droves, pouring through our porous coastline. Many found work; many others did not. The latter strain our resources in ways more than one.

Failure to find work in this land of relative plenty enforces these immigrants to a life of crime. They begin with the petty, snatching hand bags and picking pockets, before moving on to thefts and robberies. Emboldened, they resort to more serious and violent crime: armed robberies and, on occasions, even rape. The police have had to undertake the tedious chore to ferret out these criminals and the immigration enforcement staff have had to assume the onerous task of rounding up the illegal immigrants. Holding them before repatriation imposes a toll on the Treasury's coffers as they have to be fed, housed and supervised. In the past the Indonesian authorities had co-operated. Their naval vessels helped in hauling home the unwanted. The country exhaled a sigh of relief upon learning that the Indonesian President acknowledged the problems his countrymen - and women - pose in this country, especially those who do not have jobs. Abdurrahman Wahid said last Tuesday after a two-hour meeting with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that "this is an old problem and we know it ... we have to solve it amicably." Indonesia, in the Langkawi tete-a-tete between the two leaders, agreed to the deportation of the illegal immigrants. The cost of repatriation will be shared by both Governments. It is only fair and just. For we have had to endure the burden and the costs of searching out the illegals among immigrants, holding them in camps and shipping them out.

Deportation is only a partial solution to the problem of illegal immigrants. The far more serious issue is their exit from Indonesian shores. Our coastline is very long. Our naval and marine police vessels simply cannot undertake hawk-eyed patrols of our shores. Indonesians lured by the greener pastures on our side of the Malacca Straits know it, as do the avaricious transporters of human cargo.

To curb the outflow, Indonesia must initiate pre-emptive acts. The Indonesian navy and immigration department must monitor the various embarking points along their longer coastline. Their vigilance would curb the exodus of illegals from their land.

We are neighbours, Indonesia and Malaysia. We are also founding partners of the Asean grouping. Stability of the region is of utmost importance to the economic progress of both countries. Resentment caused by the presence of illegals and the crimes committed by them undermine the goodwill Malaysians have long had for Indonesia. It is not good for the bilateral relations.

We hope Indonesia realises this fact. And we trust it would execute the authority necessary to curb illegal migrants. If exits are checked, neither side would have to worry about future repatriation.

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