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Preparing for next wave of 'war refugees' from the Philippines

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THE leatherback turtles have reappeared in Port Dickson after three decades and that should be reason enough for celebration.

Properly handled, the sightings of these near extinct species will definitely boost the tourism industry besides contributing to the study of leatherbacks.

While the Negri Sembilan authorities chart out plans on how to attract more leatherbacks to their coast, their brethren in Sabah, with the assistance of security forces, are trying to figure out how to deal with the anticipated influx of refugees from south Philippines.

What's the relevance between the two issues? one might ask.

Going back in time, one may remember that it was when the country had its hands full with the boat people from war-torn Vietnam that people sighted leatherbacks in the Rantau Abang coast.

Coincidental it may be, but realities are such.

While the whole episode proves that history does repeat itself, it should also serve to remind Malaysians that history can also be a good teacher.

During the height of the Vietnamese boat people, Malaysia was under tremendous pressure on what to do with them while waiting for them to be repatriated.

On one hand, the nation has to distinguish between the economic refugees and the political ones, meaning those who ran away from Vietnam for fear of being persecuted for their ideological or political affiliation.

At the same time, fishermen from Terengganu and Kelantan, the two States that had to deal with the influx most, were putting up a strong protest against their presence as islands like Pulau Bidong and other bountiful fishing areas became off limits.

There were also stories at that time, that many turtles, leatherbacks included, were killed for food by Vietnamese refugees who took shelter on the islands off Terengganu.

By the late 1980s, the nation read horrifying stories of pirate attacks on boat people attempting to come over to Malaysia.

After some time, rape, murder and bloated bodies washed ashore did not become headline news as they became normal occurrences.

At the same time, Malaysia which hosted these refugees for a decade or so, came under international scrutiny especially on its treatment of those who had reached its shores.

The 1990s was a period when the number of boat people from Vietnam dwindled and, uncannily, so did the leatherbacks.

Meanwhile, reports of refugees from Southern Philippines entering Sabah in the wake of military attacks on the Abu Sayyaf strongholds in that area are not far-fetched.

In the first place, in Sabah especially, there is already a colony of illegal immigrants from that part of the Philippines.

Prior to this, the people of Sabah have, on numerous occasions, raised their fears and discomfort over the growing presence of these immigrants who had turned up in thousands to the Borneo State for economic purposes.

Now, with the "war situation" in Southern Philippines, the crossovers can be expected to be greater and cause further social, economic and security problems in the State.

The existence of large numbers of Filipino immigrants in Sabah will make

the process of new immigrants coming over easier as they will have "ready-made contacts" there.

If, the Vietnamese boat people, despite not having their own "contact" in Terengganu and Kelantan were able to find their way to the two States back in the 1980s, the situation will be worse with the Filipinos.

Furthermore, as pointed out by an observer, Vietnam is much further away from Terengganu if compared with the distance between Jolo and Sabah.

The way things are developing, Malaysia is clearly going to treat the refugees from the Philippines the way she did with the Vietnamese of the 1980s.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has already spelt out the "deal" that Filipinos entering Malaysia from Southern Philippines to escape attacks by the military forces will be treated as war refugees.

They will, he said, be placed in special centres and not be allowed to leave the place unless they were willing to return home.

Probably not what the fleeing Filipinos want to hear but these are the harsh realities of life.

At the same time, there are numerous lessons that Malaysians can learn from both the recent history of the Vietnamese refugees and the contemporary debacle involving the Filipinos.

In the case of the Vietnamese, their problems were due to ideological polarity within and then perpetuated by the US interference.

Vietnam was, prior to its war and its internal conflict, considered a nation with superior cultural, economic and social development than that of Malaysia and other Asean neighbours.

On the other hand, the conflict between the Muslim majority southern Filipinos and the Manila administration had originally been perceived to have been sparked off by religious differences.

However, for Malaysians, such circumstances in Vietnam and the Southern Philippines, where marginalised groups and ideological differences sparked off conflicts, it sounds alien.

At the same time, elements of these political and religious differences are as prevalent in Malaysia as they were in Vietnam and the Philippines.

Forget about the Balkan States and the Middle-East. They are too far away to make any sense to Malaysians.

But then Vietnam, the Philippines and the growing troubles in Indonesia too, could not be brushed aside.

Somehow or other, speaking of these may sound like playing an old record.

After all, there is nothing to worry. The few leatherbacks left in the world, are returning to Malaysian shores.

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