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RM150,000 Mecca airfare bill

Chow Kum Hor

SEPANG, Wed. - The Government paid RM150,000 to fly back about 300 Malaysians who had overstayed in Mecca in performing the haj, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Paduka Abdul Hamid Othman said today.

The Malaysians had to be sent home as they had gone to Saudi Arabia on visas meant only for umrah (minor haj).

He said it cost RM500 to fly back each person and it was not right to claim that the Government was responsible for the detention of those found overstaying.

"The RM500 fare was cheaper than usual as they flew on chartered flights. These planes were used to fly pilgrims to Mecca and were supposed to return empty," said Abdul Hamid at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport.

He was at the airport to welcome back the first batch of 400 pilgrims from Saudi Arabia.

He said the Saudi Arabian Government would be asked to clear the air over the detention soon.

"We (Malaysia) will ask the Saudi Arabian Government to issue a statement saying the detention was done on its own accord and they were not pressured by any quarter," said Abdul Hamid.

He added that it was also illogical for the Government to ask its Saudi Arabian counterpart to arrest these people.

"If they want to overstay, it is between them and the Saudi Arabian Government. It has nothing to do with us (Malaysian Government)."

Last Friday, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had said people should stop blaming the Saudi Arabian and Malaysian Governments over the arrests.

A week after Hari Raya Aidilfitri, the Saudi Arabian Government cracked down on foreigners using their umrah visa to perform their pilgrimage. Thousands of Pakistanis, Indonesians and Indians were also detained. On the possibility that the Opposition would politicise the detention during the Sanggang by-election, Abdul Hamid said they should not spread lies and make baseless accusations.

Meanwhile, he said 72 Malaysian pilgrims died in Mecca this year, most of whom were old and suffered from illness.

He said there were also reports that pilgrims who went to Mecca through private companies not approved by Tabung Haji received poor service.

"In one case, 18 people slept in a room meant for eight. Pilgrims who want to perform their religious obligations in the future should not go through agencies not approved by Tabung Haji," he said.

On the haj quota, Abdul Hamid said the Saudi Arabian Government allowed 22,000 Malaysians to perform their religious obligation this year.

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