

22 MAR 2000

Hamid-Allegations

SAUDI ARABIA MAY BE ASKED TO ISSUE STATEMENT TO REFUTE ALLEGATIONS

SEPANG, March 22 (Bernama) -- The Saudi Arabian authorities may be asked to issue a statement to clarify their recent action in detaining 340 Malaysians on umrah visa performing the haj.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Abdul Hamid Othman said today that the move would hopefully help refute allegations that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had asked the Saudi Arabian government to detain the Malaysians.

"We may ask for a statement from Saudi Arabia that it was that country's affairs, in accordance with their regulations...we did not interfere at all," he told reporters on his return on the first haj flight with 400 Malaysian pilgrims, at the KL International Airport, here.

He was commenting on the allegations spread in Kelantan as exposed by Dr Mahathir at the Umno Supreme Council meeting, two days ago.

Dr Abdul Hamid said it was Dr Mahathir who had decided that the government should bear the cost of the return tickets for some of them who were without tickets to ensure their release. Each charter flight ticket cost about RM500.

Abdul Hamid said that Malaysians performing the umrah were fully aware that they could not overstay in Saudi Arabia.

He envisaged that such allegations that tarnish the image of the government would be used by PAS in the Sanggang state by-election on April 1.

"PAS resorts to lies, providing inaccurate information and misleading interpretation in terms of religion and religious understanding.

"I hope that voters in Sanggang will understand that lies cannot be the basis for their stand on polling day," he said.

The straight fight between the Barisan Nasional and PAS is held following the death of Datuk Abdullah Kia on Feb 26.

Commenting on the move of the PAS-led Terengganu government to require Muslim women in the state to cover their heads, Abdul Hamid said that 90 per cent of Muslim women in the country had already been decently attired in line with religious requirements.

He said this was the result of their own awareness.

Abdul Hamid also extended the Malaysian government's gratitude to the Saudi Arabian government for the incident-free haj season.

He said that Saudi Arabia also had only praises for Malaysian pilgrims.

The Saudi Arabian government, he said, also proposed that Malaysia organise a seminar on haj management for ministers and officials in charge of the haj of other Muslim countries to adopt the Tabung Haji approach.

The last haj flight is expected to arrive here on April 19.

-- BERNAMA

MAM RM