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Take measures to prevent inflow of Indonesian illegals

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"WE did not disagree on anything," Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told a Press conference on Tuesday after emerging from a two-hour meeting with Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid.

Dr Mahathir was referring to the various issues discussed by the two leaders, ranging from joint exploration of offshore oil and gas, the development of Batam island as an Asean City, the Israeli atrocities against Palestinians, to the deportation of Indonesian illegal immigrants in Malaysia.

Abdurrahman acknowledged the fact that Malaysia was facing tremendous problems in dealing with illegal immigrants. Unwillingly, Malaysia now plays host to hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants, mostly from Indonesia, the Philippines and the Indian sub-continent.

As the industrial revolution brought with it labour-intensive industries, Malaysia became the home for some 2.5 million migrant workers, some of whom if not most, are illegals.

Although some sectors are still in need of migrant workers, others no longer need them. This is especially so because Malaysia has now moved from labour-intensive to capital-intensive ventures.

Even then, with the hope of finding employment, thousands of illegals continue to flock to the country.

Some of these illegals risk travelling through high seas to Malaysia in small overloaded boats.

The number who have met with premature deaths when their boats capsized has risen in recent years. Others are dropped by their tekongs some 2km from Malaysian shores and forced to swim to their intended destination. Some make it.

Those who make it find that jobs are not as easily available as they thought.

"If they can find jobs here, then it is fine. But quite often, they come without any idea of whether they can get employment.

"If they are unemployed, it will create problems because someone will have to feed and house them. That it is a cost to us.

"Those who have come here illegally and are unemployed, have to be sent back," Dr Mahathir said at the joint Press conference with Abdurrahman.

When jobs are not available, the hardpressed illegals may resort to criminal activities. There is no denying that crime rates involving illegal immigrants have taken an upward trend.

Diplomatically speaking, no matter how conclusive investigations are and how concrete the evidence, the imprisonment of one foreign national in another country will not go down well in the criminal's country of origin.

Unscrupulous Malaysians employing illegal immigrants may also take advantage of their employees, knowing very well that the illegals will not seek assistance from the authorities for fear of being deported, or worse imprisoned.

As seen recently, the Malaysian Embassy in Jakarta was bombed, while stones and rotten eggs were hurled by angry Indonesians at the Malaysian mission in Pontianak. Although police investigations made no headway and the real reasons for the attacks remain unknown, the fact is, there are those who are unhappy.

So, in order to prevent such problems in bilateral relations, Dr Mahathir and Abdurrahman came up with the best solution - that all

Indonesian illegal immigrants be sent back with the costs being borne jointly.

"This is an old problem. We will solve it amicably," Abdurrahman said.

This, unfortunately, is not the first time such a decision has been taken. Both countries have taken similar decisions in the past. But the problem persists, simply because the influx of Indonesian illegal immigrants continues and Immigration authorities in some Indonesian ports refuse to accept those deported.

Recently, Malaysian Immigration authorities said their counterparts at the Dumai port had refused to accept the Indonesian illegal immigrants deported from Malaysia as they did not want to bear the cost of sending them back to their respective villages.

Only a sincere two-pronged approach on the part of Indonesia can see a reduction of their nationals landing on the various illegal entry points in Malaysia.

Firstly, Indonesian authorities must increase its patrolling of coastlines and border areas to ensure that their nationals are not trying to gain entry into Malaysia illegally. Needless to say, the problem, like all other problems, is best checked at source.

Secondly, those being deported to Indonesia must be accepted without conditions attached.

In the true spirit of Asean brotherhood, Malaysia has offered to bear half the cost of deporting the illegals, although it is not compelled to do so under any international treaty or convention.

In return, Indonesia must give its full co-operation to curb the problem, now seen as a threat to national security.

Officials of the various Ministries of the two countries have been given the mandate to solve problems pertaining to the deportation of the illegal Indonesians.

Their responsibility should not end there.

Seeking an agreement on deportation alone will not solve the problem. They must also take steps to prevent continuous inflow of Indonesians to Malaysia - a problem that might just get out of hand.

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