

20/04/2001

Consulate closed following fears of demonstrations

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - The Government has temporarily closed its consulate in Pontianak and evacuated 13 staff and family members after fears of demonstrations over alleged ill-treatment of an Indonesian in Sarawak.

Following the closure last Tuesday, three staff have been left behind to monitor developments.

A Foreign Ministry spokesman said the consulate will remain closed until further notice.

The move was deemed necessary following advice from security authorities in West Kalimantan.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was confident that Indonesian authorities would ensure the safety of consulate staff.

"I feel that they will be taken care of," he said after attending the Young African Leadership and Intellectual Dialogue: Dr Mahathir's Perspective On the Role of the New Generation in Developing Countries.

The demonstrations were expected following a report, believed to be published in an Indonesian daily, stating that an Indonesian involved in a court case in Sarawak was allegedly ill-treated by authorities.

Pontianak has come under international media focus following bloody ethnic violence which erupted between Dayak tribesmen and Madurese recently.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said the evacuation followed possible threats to the safety of staff and family members.

"This move was decided as Kalimantan authorities disclosed that there may be particular groups planning to hold demonstrations at the consulate.

"We view the advice very seriously as prior to this, eight cars and a bus ferrying Malaysians were temporarily detained while journeying to Pontianak," he told a Press conference at the Parliament lobby.

Elaborating on the evacuation, Syed Hamid said nine family members were taken to Kuching, while four others were sent here.

Describing the situation to be under control, Syed Hamid said the move to evacuate family members was a precautionary measure.

"Wisma Putra is monitoring the situation and will take measures to ensure safety of our people there."

Malaysia consul in Pontianak, Ismail Salam, who is one of three staff left behind, confirmed the closure of the consulate.

The evacuation took place just after dawn today when a Royal Malaysian Air Force C130 transporter took off from its airbase in Subang.

Flown by Kol Azizul Arif Abdul Ghani and assisted by Kapt Aznol Adly Adnan, the aircraft touched down in Pontianak about two hours later.

The 13 who boarded the aircraft were the Consulate's officers' wives and children, a staff of the consulate and an Indonesian maid.

Nine of them got off when the aircraft landed at the Kuching International Airport, while the remaining four continued their journey to RMAF Subang.

The four were the consulate's administrative assistant Rodziah Idris, Zarinah Ahmad Nordin (wife of Assistant Consul Mohd Nizam Ramli who has remained behind), their daughter Norhidayah and maid Yayuk Yuliana.

In Kuching, bus companies plying the Kuching-Pontianak route have been directed to cease operations temporarily.

The directive was issued by the State Immigration department today.

On Aug 31 last year, a mob of about 30 men and women hurled rotten eggs,

filthy drain water and stones at the consulate.

They smashed several window-panes of the consulate and damaged the guard house.

About four days earlier, an explosive device was hurled into the compound of the Malaysian Embassy in Jakarta. No one was injured in the incident. Biaramas Express Sdn Bhd manager Henry Lai said the company's decision would depend on the extent of unrest across the border.

"The company may face some problems as some passengers who have bought their tickets a few days back will be stranded here if we cease operations immediately," he said.

He said the Pontianak-bound bus, Tebakang Express, began dropping off passengers up to the Tebedu immigration point, about 90km from Kuching, without proceeding to Pontianak, about nine hours overland.

The company, which operates daily services between the two destinations, was advised by the immigration authorities at the Tebedu immigration minicomplex against going to Pontianak for their own safety.

In one incident, it was reported that a group of Malaysians from Sarawak travelling to Pontianak were illegally confined and their families asked to pay for their release.