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Megawati: Indon job-seekers must enter Malaysia legally

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - President Megawati Sukarnoputri today told Indonesians wanting to work in this country to enter through legal channels as the republic wished to maintain good relations with Malaysia.

She said those working here illegally should get their documents legalised. "I have been told there are 1.5 million Indonesians in Malaysia. I hope that all of you have legal passports, work permits and visas," she said.

She was addressing about 350 Indonesian officials, workers, permanent residents and students at the Indonesian embassy.

There are an estimated 600,000 Indonesians working illegally in Malaysia.

Last Monday, the Cabinet Committee on Illegal Immigrants proposed stiffer penalties including whipping for illegal immigrants, their employers and those who brought them into the country.

Malaysia wants Indonesian workers to enter the country legally so that they would be protected from being exploited by unscrupulous groups.

However, the Indonesian authorities have protested against the proposal to whip their citizens.

Also present at the embassy meeting were Megawati's husband, Taufiq Kiemas, Indonesian Foreign Minister Noer Hassan Wirajuda and Indonesian Ambassador to Malaysia Drs Hadi Wayarabi Al Hadar.

Megawati urged her people to work together to help Indonesia prosper. She said that during her visits to Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand before arriving in Kuala Lumpur, the leaders of these countries had offered to sell rice to Indonesia on a long-term basis.

"I was so embarrassed. If I were an ostrich, I would bury my head in the sand in shame.

"I don't mean to offend Myanmar. But here we are, a country so big and with so vast potentials and yet we have to seek assistance from a country like Myanmar whose population may be less than ours in Jakarta," she said. She said Indonesia could not continue in such a situation and efforts must be made to improve matters.

Megawati said Indonesia would sign an agreement with the International Monetary Fund in Paris on Sept 5 on loans for its economic recovery package. "I have to admit that this is not something to be proud of. It's about having to borrow money," she said.

She said Indonesia could not continue to be a debtor forever. The republic, she said, must be self-sufficient to meet its needs.

On Aceh, she said, Jakarta had agreed to grant autonomy to the province and to review some of the outdated laws.

"I believe whatever problems there are can be solved through negotiations. But if they are seeking a separation, then Jakarta will act accordingly," she said.

Earlier, Dr Mahathir bade farewell to Megawati at Mandarin Oriental Hotel at a 30-minute meeting before she left for Jakarta. Also present were Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and minister-in-attendance Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman.