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Workers-Action  
ACTION AGAINST ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS NECESSARY

By: Openg Onn

JAKARTA, Sept 2 (Bernama) -- When a small band of Indonesian activists dressed in black vented their fury on Malaysia by staging a rowdy demonstration more than a week ago, they did more than torch the "Jalur Gemilang" and tear down the Malaysian Embassy gates in Jakarta.

They threatened to ignite the fire of hatred using the spark left by the "Crush Malaysia" campaign launched by the late President Sukarno.

For decades, Malaysia had been a reluctant host to Indonesian illegal immigrants who at one time numbered more than a million.

This figure matched the number of those coming in legally in search of jobs after finding none at home.

The number had been reduced to half following the financial crisis that hit the region in mid 1997.

Despite being reportedly squeezed of their rupiah by unscrupulous middlemen, the illegal immigrants still come in droves.

Though admittedly, they had contributed much to Malaysia's physical development in terms of labour force, it is an undisputed fact that millions of Indonesians prosper through money sent home by their breadwinners.

When they first came to Malaysia they were greenhorns in the construction industry earning daily wages ranging from RM10 to RM15. Malaysian housing developers then taught them construction skills which they quickly learnt and became skilled workers, earning wages of up to RM80 a day.

Several villages like in the Tulungagung district of East Java or even as far as the remote island of Bawean, north of East Java enjoy relatively better living conditions because thousands of their people work overseas especially Malaysia.

In Bawean, one of the roads has been named after Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad by the islanders who admired the Prime Minister.

Several Indonesian leaders and politicians claimed Malaysia was being ungrateful by deporting thousands of their illegal workers and enforcing a law that provided caning for such people.

The People's Consultative Council Speaker Amien Rais described caning as being inhumane and an insult to Indonesians.

President Megawati Sukarnoputri has since called for restraint in responding to the illegal workers' issue while Prime Minister Mahathir had said only a small group of Indonesians was involved in the demonstration outside the Malaysian Embassy and that no official protest would be made.

Amien Rais had probably overlooked the fact that the major source of the problem was within his own country where there was no proper handling of the deported workers and no job opportunities were provided to them.

The Indonesian Government had admitted that Malaysia had given sufficient warning on the implementation of the law and the deportation exercise but its officials were slow to respond.

A foreign analyst with the Indonesian Institute of Sciences, Dewi Fortuan Anwar said the hostile statements from leaders like Amien were merely to offset the silence and failure of the government in handling the issue.

Dewi, who was also the adviser on foreign affairs to former President B.J. Habibie, said the government must redress the poor management system of its people working overseas.

Former Manpower Minister, Fahmi Idris said Indonesia should discuss the issue with Malaysia at the highest level.

"Malaysia's concern about upholding its law should not be questioned as the same penalty is being imposed against offenders from other countries and even Malaysian collaborators," he said.

Fahmi, who is also a Golkar Party leader, praised Malaysia for being very firm in enforcing its laws.

For many years the Malaysian law enforcement authority had been facing problems with a high crime rate and drug abuse in the country and many of the cases involved illegal immigrants, he said.

Records showed that they were involved in a string of violent acts, challenging the police in the course of discharging their their duties or quarrelling among their fellow workers that worried the locals.

As a developing country exposed to the global or regional economic vagaries and the strong desire to put its house in order, Malaysia certainly could not entertain these bad hats forever, he said.

Malaysia had for a long time been trying to persuade them to return home and get proper documents if they wished to continue working.

As documented workers they would not be exploited but accorded proper status as foreign workers, an observer said.

The new measures would benefit everyone in the longterm, he added.

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