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## An airing of issues in Bali

AFTER the shambolic presidency of Abdurrahman Wahid, who fumbled his way around unfamiliar political waters and stepped on toes in the process, Indonesia is finally settling down into the regional partner that Malaysia can do business with. But only just. Jakarta is still in the thick of a historic transition. And its relations with its near neighbours are helplessly bound up with an uphill struggle to keep its house in order.

Indonesia's situation pleads for understanding. Its well-wishers are often caught between effusive encouragement and impatience over a government that seems forever on the verge of getting its act together, but can't quite get there. US Secretary of State Colin Powell, for example, speaks for many others. On a recent visit to Jakarta he described co-operation over terrorism as "very, very positive" but added the qualifier that "much more needs to be done".

Indeed, much more needs to be done on the thorniest issue between Indonesia and Malaysia - illegal immigration. The crunch had come with the 1997 Asian financial crisis, which created the double whammy of a free-floating mass of unrooted migrants and a rush of Indonesians fleeing turmoil at home.

Malaysia's get-tough policy was long in the making, after a series of softer approaches had failed. The half a million or so mostly Indonesian illegal immigrants are an undeniable social burden and security risk. Malaysia's response has been firm: if they cannot find legal employment, they must be sent home, as quickly as possible. It must ensure that only needed workers will henceforth be brought in. For both these reasons, Kuala Lumpur requires Indonesia's support and co-operation.

Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri, meeting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in Bali last week, said that she understood Malaysia's position. But for Jakarta, the forced return of the workers adds to "logistical and unemployment" problems in a country where 40 per cent of its 210 million population are said to be jobless.

Indonesia has asked for the deportation exercise to be extended for another month. After already having granted a four-month reprieve for the voluntary repatriation of the workers, Malaysia can hardly brook further delay. In Bali, officials entrusted to build on the growing rapport between President Megawati and Prime Minister Mahathir produced no binding commitment on the control of illegal immigration.

Further heel-dragging on the pressing matter of migrant workers could impede progress elsewhere. A resolution of the labour issue is pivotal to wider economic co-operation, which has already made Malaysia Indonesia's largest investor. Internal snags also bedevil Thailand, whose Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, was the third member of the trination mini-summit in Bali.

Thai officials were unable to move forward on the joint development of a gas pipeline across Southern Thailand, which was signed in 1999. The project appears to have been stymied by protests against a government embarrassed by its failure to abide by the newly-minted constitution's requirement to preserve traditional communities' way of life.

Bali was a showcase of Asean fraternity at its face-to-face best. Even so, it displayed a very limited ability to translate the earnest and well-meaning statements of its leaders into concrete steps. Malaysia is prepared to go along with the shambling pace of Asean consensus-building,

even over the location of the secretariat of the new Asean+3, an East Asian consultative grouping that it championed for a decade. But if Asean is to mean more than a pageant of friendship, its largest members, particularly Thailand and Indonesia, must first bridge the gap between their peoples' expectations and the conduct and performance of their governments.