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Decision on Indon workers stays

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MALACCA, Fri. - Malaysia will not review its decision to hire Indonesian workers as a last resort as there are more of them in the country than necessary.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today that their numbers were already too large without factoring in those entering the country illegally.

"In fact, we have more than enough, what more with those entering the country illegally. We already have adequate number of legalised workers," the Prime Minister told a Press conference after launching the 20th World Customs Day at the Akademi Kastam diRaja in Bukit Baru.

Dr Mahathir, who was on a one-day working visit to the State, said this when asked to comment on a report that Indonesian Vice-President Hamzah Haz was planning a visit to Malaysia to meet the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister said: "We do not need that many (workers). What do they want to do here?"

The Government, he said, had once introduced an amnesty programme to legalise Indonesian workers in Malaysia but this had not helped resolve the problem of illegal entry of workers.

In fact, the situation worsened as many came in the hope of being legalised.

On whether a major and nationwide operation to nab and deport illegal workers was necessary, Dr Mahathir said those without valid permits would be deported.

"But because the number is big, we have to do this gradually."

The conduct of Indonesian workers in Malaysia has come under scrutiny recently following a spate of riot and disturbances caused by them.

Last week, 500 Indonesian workers of a textile factory went on a rampage, attacking policemen and damaging vehicles.

Early this week, some 100 Indonesians clashed in Cyberjaya, resulting in the burning of several stalls.

Last month, some 1,800 immigrants awaiting deportation at a detention centre in Pekan Nenas, Johor, rioted and torched a section of their quarters.

On whether the country's image would suffer following police disclosure of the close links between Kumpulan Militan Malaysia and the al-Qaeda network, Dr Mahathir said the world knew of Malaysia's stand against terrorism and its determination to eradicate groups using violence to achieve their objectives.

The Prime Minister was also asked whether kindergartens and madrasah run by an Opposition party could be likened as the breeding grounds for potential terrorists.

"Not yet. But it is clear there are people who are interested. Young children are taught the culture of hatred... this is the beginning," he said, adding that what had happened in Pakistan and Afghanistan should be an eye-opener.

Dr Mahathir said the Government was worried about the tendency of parents sending children to Pakistan and some other countries for religious studies.

"They go to Pakistan purportedly to learn religion but the madrasah they attend do not teach religion but how to revolt and topple the Government. They come into contact with the Taliban and al-Qaeda where they are taught

about explosives, guerilla warfare, weapons etc.

"When they come back to Malaysia, they put into practice what they have learnt. They murdered a politician, robbed banks to finance their activities and tried to steal weapons from a police station."

Dr Mahathir said there was once an interview in which a student at a madrasah said he wanted to become a holy warrior when asked about his ambition. "He replied he wanted to become a holy warrior... this shows they did not learn religion."

In his speech, he said the Government would only be able to develop the country and pay higher salaries to civil servants if there was progress and taxes were paid by the private sector.

Dr Mahathir said customs officials should always maintain integrity and professionalism in ensuring that taxes owed to the Government were duly paid.

The Prime Minister said the Government could only carry out development projects and programmes for the people and country if it received sufficient revenue.

The Prime Minister also launched the department's new name, uniform and logo.

The Prime Minister said the Customs Department would continue to play a crucial role, even during the post-Afta (Asean Free Trade Area) period, when revenue from import and export duties was expected to see a significant reduction.

"It looks like the department will be collecting less taxes in future. But the Government may introduce new taxes to ensure the service of the department is still needed."

Dr Mahathir advised Customs officials to stay away from graft although there could be plenty of opportunities to make quick money.

"The opportunities might be there but one must remember that most likely, the long arms of the law will catch up with them later. It will be of no use to regret our action then," he said.

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