

09 AUG 2002

Workers

TWO INDON MINISTERS IN ROW OVER WORKERS ISSUE

JAKARTA, Aug 9 (Bernama) -- The cancellation of the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on Indonesian illegal workers by Indonesian and Malaysian officials in Bali yesterday left unfinished business between two Indonesian ministers, reports here said.

Disgruntled Manpower and Transmigration Minister Jacob Nuwa Wea blamed Foreign Affairs Minister Hassan Wirayudi for the cancellation of the MoU on the issue of the ongoing exodus of thousands of immigrant workers from Malaysia.

"I came to Bali because I thought we would sign the MoU on the deportation of these workers," Jacob, a former labour activist, said as quoted by "The Jakarta Post".

The minister, disgusted over the cancellation, left the island resort province ahead of the signing of the other MoUs before President Megawati Sukarnoputri and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The MoUs are on immigration, women's empowerment, the setting up of the Indonesia-Malaysia Business Council, the Indonesia-Malaysia Friendship Association (Permas) and the Malaysia-Indonesia Friendship Association (Permai).

Jacob claimed to have done his work by helping the workers win a guarantee that they could return to the neighbouring country, by sending two of his aides for talks with their Malaysian counterparts.

"I really regret the decision not to pursue the deal with Malaysia, especially on the deportation issue," he said.

Another daily, "Kompas", quoted Jacob as saying that the MoU had actually been carved out following a meeting of senior officials of the two countries in Kuala Lumpur recently.

According to Coordinating Minister for People's Welfare Yusuf Kalla, the cancellation of the MoU could be due to the outstanding matters that had yet to be agreed to by both countries.

"We talked about long term, not just about today's interest...on how the illegal workers could get legal status (when working in Malaysia)," he said.

It was the second time in less than two months that the outspoken Jacob has been involved in polemics with a fellow minister. He was accused by Trade and Industry Minister Rini Soewandi of discouraging investment with his excessive support of the labour movement.

Hassan, in his response, said that both countries understand perfectly that the illegal workers issue was a sensitive matter.

"We want to reach a comprehensive agreement on these workers, not just the deportation issue," he said.

Malaysia enforced, on Aug 1, new immigration laws forcing illegal workers mostly Indonesians to leave the country or face severe punishment including the possibility of the imposition of six strokes of the cane.

Meanwhile, another national daily, "Republika", in its editorial today, blamed the Indonesian government's action "in socialising" the new immigration laws against the illegal workers after Malaysia warned of its implementation months ago.

"We can understand the attitude and policy of the Malaysian government. What we fail to understand is what has been done by the Indonesian government in tackling the Indonesian workers issue, especially those illegals," it said.

-- BERNAMA
OPP RM