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Malaysia may turn elsewhere (HL)

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SHAH ALAM, Tues. - The Government may be compelled to turn to other countries to educate Malaysian students whose visa applications to return to the United States have been refused or delayed, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

Describing the US Government's decision of not renewing or delaying the student visas as unfortunate as the students were not terrorists, Dr Mahathir said the Government would look into solving the problem in the best interest of the students.

"Of course we have to find ways of making them continue with their education. This is very unfortunate because they are not terrorists," Dr Mahathir said when asked if the Government would consider alternative destinations.

The Prime Minister was speaking at a Press conference after delivering a keynote address at the "Understanding Malaysia as an Islamic state" seminar here this morning.

Yesterday, Deputy Education Minister Datuk Abdul Aziz Samsuddin said that more than 150 Malaysian students, mostly Muslims, were in a quandary after the US embassy here, acting on orders from Washington, denied them visas to return to the US to continue their studies.

Aziz said that the students were left in the lurch as most of them were in their third or final year of their studies.

Dr Mahathir said Kuala Lumpur would most probably not protest against the US stand but the matter might be further deliberated by the Cabinet.

Asked if the US visa denial was tantamount to the denial of the students' right to education, contrary to the Human Rights values often preached by the US, Dr Mahathir said:

"But it is their country and I suppose they have a right. We also have the right to prevent undesirable people from coming into our country.

"That is their decision (and) I have no questions (about that) but don't question what we do in this country and US embassy admits delays but says very few students are denied visas don't come and interfere with the administration of our country."

However, the US embassy here issued a statement clarifying that the visas were delayed due to the ongoing review of its Government's visa issuing practices.

"While it is true that many Malaysian students have been delayed in travelling to the US to either begin or resume their studies, very few students have actually been denied a visa," the statement read.

"The time needed for adjudication of individual cases will continue to be difficult to predict.

"We deeply regret that this change in procedure has affected many Malaysian students."

In Kuala Lumpur, Umno Youth submitted a memorandum of protest to the US embassy, voicing regrets over the unusual delay in processing visa applications of about 150 Malaysian Muslim students.

The memorandum, from Umno Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein to US Ambassador Marie T. Huhtala, was handed over by Umno Youth secretary Zulkifli Alwi to embassy's chief of consular section Colwell Whitney, at 3.30m.

He was accompanied by the movement's education bureau chairman Dr Adham Baba and international affairs bureau chairman Dr Shamsul Anwar Sulaiman.

Meanwhile, Carolyn Hong reports from New York that the US had rectified its visa processing procedures to reduce the delays which had caused so much despair to Malaysian students.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said this assurance was conveyed to him by the US Director of Homeland Security, Governor Tom Ridge, at a meeting in the White House, yesterday.

This newlycreated department is responsible for matters which, in Malaysia, would be under the purview of the Home Ministry.

Abdullah, who is Home Minister, said Ridge told him that the period of visa applications has been "sub-stancially reduced" although no commitment was given on a specific time-frame for visa approval.

"Many of our students are facing problems as they have already secured places in universities, or are to continue their studies there," he said after the 45minute meeting with Ridge.

"Some students are on twinning programmes with American universities and would face problems if they cannot continue with their course." He also had a separate 45minute meeting with National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice at the White House.

Abdullah said at least 200 government scholars, including those on Public Service Department and Mara scholarships, were affected and there was likely to be as many private students who were also affected.

They are all male students of all races.

Since July, the Bush administration has imposed stringent visa checks on male citizens, aged between 16 and 45, from 26 countries.

Most of the countries on the list are in the Middle East. Malaysia, Pakistan and Indonesia are also on the list. Visa applications from these countries have to be approved by officials in Washington.

Previously, applications could be processed by the consular offices or embassies after a routine check.

The new procedures have caused a backlog of reportedly at least 100,000 visa applications which had to be reviewed by the FBI and CIA.

Abdullah said he told Ridge that it was not fair to paint all Malaysians with the same brush, just because it was an Islamic country and has its share of militant groups including those with links to Al-Qaeda.

"I said that Islam is a religion of peace, development and progress, and Malaysia was willing to co-operate with any party," he said.

The visa problem was first raised by Abdullah with US Secretary of State Colin Powell during his visit to Malaysia in July.

Abdullah said he also discussed with Ridge Malaysia's plans to set up a Coast Guard unit for better surveillance of the Malaysian coastline, and the US has agreed to co-operate. The US has long experience in this area.

On his meeting with Rice, Abdullah said he had told her that a unilateral attack on Iraq by the US would raise the level of terror activities as it would stir up anger in the Muslim world.

Rice did not agree with this as nothing of this sort had happened in late 1998 after a brief bombing campaign in Iraq by the US and Britain when weapons inspectors were expelled.

However, Abdullah said terrorism at that time was not on the scale or level that it was today.

He also raised concerns about equating terrorism with Islam, and Rice had assured him that President George W. Bush was trying hard to dispel the perception that the US was anti-Islam.

"I said that the efforts should be stepped up," he said.

They also discussed the issue of Palestine, and the need to keep up the momentum and not put this on the back-burner while the focus shifted to Iraq.

Abdullah will meet US Vice-President Dick Cheney later today.

