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Sabah-Illegals

NO MERCY FOR ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS IN SABAH

By: Newmond Tibin

KOTA KINABALU, Jan 25 (Bernama) -- After staying for decades in the perceived land of lawlessness and regarding themselves as untouchables, the time has finally come for the illegal immigrants in Sabah to face the music.

The government is to launch a massive operation soon to rid "the land below the wind" from the illegal immigrants' problem.

Like it or not, the illegals especially those who have lived in Sabah for years must face what is called the country's "rule of law."

After all this while ridiculing the authorities' efforts to tackle the problem as a laughing stock, they are now merely waiting for the right time for action to be taken against them under existing legal provisions including deportation to their homeland.

Before the authorities were seen to be hesitant to take action but now the situation has changed, the state government is bent on enforcing the law and restore the people's confidence on the seriousness of the authorities in tackling the problem that had "haunted" Sabah for years.

"This time we're serious in tackling the problem. The action we take will serve as a stern warning to them who think that they can come here as they liked," Chief Minister Datuk Chong Kah Kiat said.

He said while the influx of fresh immigrants had stopped, efforts are being focused to solve in stages the problem of illegal immigrants who have been in the state for a long time.

As an early indication towards that, the Federal Special Task Force launched an operation to evict illegal immigrants and demolish squatter houses on Wednesday in Pulau Gaya, located near to the state capital.

Pulau Gaya is one of the three big foreigners' squatter colonies in Sabah. The other two are Kampung BDC in Sandakan and Kampung Ice Box in Tawau.

General Operations Force, Royal Malaysian Navy, marine police, immigration and Kota Kinabalu City Council enforcement personnel were involved in the three-day integrated operation.

On the first day itself, 114 squatter houses occupied by foreigners were pulled down.

"This is a bold move. We support the government's action to clean up the island from illegal immigrants which we have been hoping all this while," said Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) youth chief Almudin Kaida.

He said the move was appropriate and timely as Pulau Gaya is said to be the place for "asylum seekers" and "hideout" for illegal immigrants who commit crime in the mainland.

"We hope similar operations will be extended to other areas. We cannot afford to be soft with them anymore," he said.

Nonetheless, the authorities faced a tough task in tackling the illegals' problem especially in Pulau Gaya as their status was unclear, thus rendering eviction action problematic.

Some quarters recognise them as locals as they have Malaysian identity cards but many disagree to their status as they are not locals.

Evelyn Petrus, 20, a private sector employee in the state capital, said it is strange that "some of them have legal documents but they are not legal."

"To me, they're not locals...when they speak their dialect, it's like the dialect of immigrants," he said.

Unlike in Peninsular Malaysia where the government is faced with the influx of Indonesian workers, Sabah is riddled with the problem of illegals, majority of whom are Filipinos.

The National Population and Housing Census statistics showed there are more than 600,000 illegal immigrants registered in Sabah.

Many of them have to cross rough seas to come here as according to them "Sabah is a haven to earn a living."

Many supported the government's latest move to tackle the illegal immigrants' problem in Sabah seen as the best solution after the amnesty programme introduced in 1997.

"It's good the government is taking stern action. It's difficult for them to enter the state now...those who have entered, we've to drive them out," said Adrian Bumon, 23, a teacher, from Kampung Tiong Gondohon, Tuaran.

He said although the state needs foreign workers, their presence in excess could lead to "side effects" like what happened in the peninsula last week.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had recently expressed his concern over the huge number of illegal immigrants in the country including in Sabah as it might be a problem to the government if they launched big scale disturbances.

Dr Mahathir said the government could no longer view lightly the various problems caused by foreigners working in Malaysia.

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