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Repatriation due to alarming level of illegals here, says Dr M

Ashraf Abdullah

THE number of illegal workers in Malaysia, most of whom are Indonesians, had reached an alarming level and they have to be repatriated, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said here yesterday.

Dr Mahathir, who is on a two-day working visit to Indonesia, told a joint Press conference with President Megawati Sukarnoputri that the number of foreign workers had reached two million, almost 10 per cent of the Malaysian population of 22 million.

An estimated 450,000 of the illegal immigrants in Malaysia are Indonesians.

"As a Government responsible for the well-being and security of the Malaysian people, we have to repatriate those who come illegally and those who do not have jobs. Of the illegals, most are from Indonesia. We have given them enough time to return to their country.

"If they come and are able to get employment, it's all right. But there are many who resort to crime because they are unable to get jobs. This is making Malaysians rather uneasy," he said.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia still needed the services of foreign workers, but those who came to Malaysia for employment must have valid documents and ready employers.

"I understand that it is not easy for Indonesia to stop its people from going to Malaysia illegally. That is something that we will have to deal with jointly."

Dr Mahathir said although illegal immigrants in Malaysia also included other nationalities, including Africans, the majority of them were Indonesians.

The Prime Minister said most of the illegal immigrants waited until the amnesty period was almost over before returning home, causing congestion at the various exit points in Malaysia.

"As a result of the rush, there were isolated cases of clashes between them and Government officials.

"We will ensure that this does not recur and we hope that it does not affect the good relations between our two countries," he said.

The amnesty period ended on July 31.

Megawati said Indonesia had set up a task force to look into the problem of Indonesians going to Malaysia illegally.

She said as Malaysia would host the Non-Aligned Movement Summit and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference next year, Indonesia would like to hold pre-summit talks with Malaysia to discuss issues of mutual interest which could be raised at the summits.

On trade relations between Malaysia and Indonesia, Dr Mahathir said both sides wanted to see an increase in trade activities.

Malaysia is Indonesia's largest investor.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand had agreed to purchase goods sourced from within the Asean region.

"This will increase trade in the region.

"We find that we are buying a lot of goods from elsewhere when the same goods are available in the region," he said.

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was also present to witness the trilateral agreement among Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand on rubber production.

The agreement is to stabilise the price of rubber by stockpiling rubber

products. Dr Mahathir also held an hour of talks with Shinawatra.

Later, when speaking to Malaysian journalists, Dr Mahathir said Thailand and Indonesia were not against Malaysia's proposal to host the Asean+3 secretariat.

"This will be discussed by the leaders at the Asean summit in Cambodia," he said.

Dr Mahathir and Megawati launched the Indonesia-Malaysia Joint Business Council as well as the Lembaga Persahabatan Indonesia-Malaysia (Prime) and Lembaga Persahabatan Malaysia-Indonesia (Permai).

They also witnessed the signing of several Memorandums of Understanding. They included the MoU between Malaysia and Indonesia in the field of women's empowerment and family development and the MoU on co-operation on immigration matters.

Dr Mahathir later left for Kuala Lumpur.