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Malaysia, Indonesia sign MoU on workers

By Amy Chew

MALAYSIA and Indonesia yesterday signed a memorandum of understanding to address the problem of over 500,000 illegal Indonesian workers seeking employment in the country.

The MoU seeks better protection for the Indonesian workers and greater responsibility from Malaysian employers such as providing insurance coverage for accidents and medical care.

"With the MoU, we can address the problem of illegal workers. I understand that apart from the legal aspect, it also concerns their welfare," said Human Resources Minister Datuk Fong Chan Onn after the signing ceremony with Indonesian Labour Minister Jacob Nuwa Wea.

"We have specified in the MoU that every worker has to be covered by the workers' compensation pact. They (employers) have to purchase insurance for their workers," said Fong.

He said the pact would come into effect on July 1.

The MoU is a result of almost two years of arduous work involving many departments in both countries.

Indonesia and Malaysia started working on the MoU in mid-2002 after a crackdown on illegal workers which resulted in thousands of them fleeing the country to avoid tough new labour laws. Those caught working illegally face caning, fines and imprisonment.

Relations became strained when Amien Rais, the Speaker of Indonesia's highest law-making body, the People's Consultative Assembly, warned then Prime Minister Datuk Seri (now Tun) Dr Mahathir Mohamad that he was "playing with fire".

Rais has just entered for the presidential election due to be held on July 5.

Indonesia wants the number of domestic workers in Malaysia to be reduced in tandem with an increase in Indonesians working in the formal sector.

"I want the number of domestic helpers (in Malaysia) to be reduced. I want to have more people working in the formal sector. I will try to increase the standard of human resources here through education," said Nuwa Wea.

According to Fong, Indonesia's efforts to reduce the number of Indonesian domestic helpers is in line with the Government's long-term stance of reducing dependency on foreign labour.

"In the long run, it is consistent with Malaysia's stance. We want to reduce our dependence on foreign workers, including foreign maids.

"We have to re-examine the ways which we perform our household chores so that we can greatly reduce our dependence on foreign labour," said Fong.

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