

30/08/2003

Equal focus on shared problems

BILATERAL co-operation between Indonesia and Malaysia in mutually beneficial areas has long been the practice, with the focus shifting in line with changing priorities. Strengthening intelligence-sharing for containing the problems of terrorism and illegal immigration are the current focus of the recent annual consultation between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and President Megawati Sukarnoputri, which took place in Kuching.

For Malaysia, stemming illegal immigration is of the greatest urgency. The number of aliens in the country has long imposed serious costs, such as in lawlessness and crime. To Indonesia, meanwhile, the Bali and the Hotel Marriott bombings are placing the impetus elsewhere. Terrorism has become its main concern since more than the nation's security is at stake. Militancy, both political and religious, risks undermining the economy. Tourists and investors are holding it back from a fuller recovery after the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Doubts, some of them exaggerated, about Indonesia's political stability and commitment to the fight against terrorism have spawned Jakarta's interest in an Asean security community.

Given Malaysia's desire to plug its porous borders and with Indonesia wanting to wish away poverty, a fertile seedbed of terror, coming together in a concerted effort to prosper Indonesia seems the obvious way to keeping Malaysians safe and secure. Intelligence-sharing alone cannot keep hungry, poor Indonesians away. Harsh penalties may work to a certain extent. But more efforts are needed from both sides to keep the illegals out.

Malaysians can help by obeying the law and depriving illegal labour of its many sanctuaries. They must resist the convenience of lower costs and allow for tightened regulations to have effect. Only then will illegal migrants, desperate for work, be put off from trying their luck here. On the other side of the border, the push factors that tempt Indonesians to emigrate must be addressed as a matter of national urgency. No self-respecting nation would want to be a cheap source of foreign labour. We wish Indonesia to be as prosperous as we are.