

Malaysia lukewarm on Australia asylum centre plan
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Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak offered lukewarm support Thursday to Australia's proposal for a regional processing centre for asylum seekers, during his first visit to the country since taking office.

He discussed the plans for the regional refugee facility, which Australia hopes to build in neighbouring East Timor, during a meeting with his counterpart Julia Gillard in Canberra.

People-smuggling is a hot-button issue in Australia after more than 6,300 asylum seekers made their way to the country by boat last year - the highest number on record - and Malaysia is considered a key transit nation.

"We need a bit of time to study the Australian proposal but we will be as positive as we can," Najib told reporters after the talks, saying it would be discussed further at an upcoming regional human- trafficking meeting in Bali.

"We have to take a regional outlook first and we will be as cooperative as possible," he said, when pressed about his position.

Najib, who came to office in 2009, highlighted a recent amendment to anti-trafficking act - which was welcomed by Gillard - saying the penalties for people-smuggling were now "very severe".

"We will do our part to make sure that Malaysia is never a transit point for these people and this is where cooperation in terms of exchange of timely intelligence will be very useful for us to make the appropriate interdiction," he said.

Gillard's centre-left Labor government claims offshore detention will have a deterrent effect on the thousands of asylum seekers who head through Southeast Asian countries on their way to Australia every year.

East Timorese President Jose Ramos-Horta has said the proposed centre to be built in his impoverished nation had to be temporary and could cost about US\$30 million.

Australia has a policy of detaining immigrants on arrival and the large influx of boat people - mostly from Afghanistan, Iraq and Sri Lanka - has stretched its facilities to breaking point.

In December, about 50 people were killed when a ship sank carrying scores of asylum seekers travelling from Indonesia sank at the remote Indian Ocean outpost of Christmas Island, Australia's main immigration detention centre.

- AFP