

Australia says human rights key to M'sia refugee deal

Malaysiakini.com

June 5, 2011

Australia today said human rights would be a key element in its deal with Kuala Lumpur to send 800 asylum seekers to Malaysia, as the UN welcomed its move to treat minors on a case-by-case basis.

Australia is in advanced discussions with Malaysia on a plan to send 800 asylum seekers to the Southeast Asian nation in exchange for accepting some 4,000 of its registered refugees.

Cabinet minister Jenny Macklin said a human rights reference was included in Australia's original in-principle agreement between Prime Minister Julia Gillard (right) and her Malaysian counterpart Najib Abdul Razak (left), and the issue was key to the government.

"That is very important to us and something that we know is critical to achieve in the final agreement," Families Minister Macklin told ABC television.

Canberra has come under fire in recent days for proposing there be no blanket exceptions to its plan to send asylum seekers to Malaysia, even for minors, despite the country not be a signatory to the UN refugees convention.

Refugee advocates have suggested that asylum seekers could be mistreated in Malaysia, arguing that unaccompanied children were particularly vulnerable.

Immigration Minister Chris Bowen indicated Saturday that unaccompanied minors would be managed on a "case by case basis", with anyone considered vulnerable afforded "particular care".

"We will consider, in those cases, if it is appropriate to transfer those people to Malaysia or to make other arrangements, and if they are transferred to Malaysia, what care and support needs to be put in place," Bowen said.

The UNHCR, which had said it was unable to lend its support to a plan that did not protect vulnerable groups such as unaccompanied children, welcomed Bowen's comments and said it remained committed to negotiations on the scheme.

Refugees are a sensitive issue in Australia, where a record 6,900 illegal immigrants arrived by boat in 2010, mostly on rickety vessels from Indonesia and usually hailing from strife-torn Iraq, Afghanistan or Sri Lanka.

- AFP