

Gov't to offer illegals amnesty to work

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The government is to offer amnesty to some of its two million illegal immigrants in a plan to ease labour shortages in the plantation and service industries, a senior minister said today.

"(It's) not legalising them to be citizens but legalising them to stay (and work in Malaysia) legally," Hishammuddin Hussein, who is responsible for internal security, told reporters.

With one of Asia's largest populations of foreign labourers, Malaysia relies heavily on immigrants, especially from neighbouring Southeast Asian countries, to clean homes, care for children and work in construction, plantations and factories.

Many of the illegals are poorly paid Indonesians who work long hours in menial jobs shunned by locals.

Hishammuddin said the scheme to legalise the workers would allow them to gain employment and not be exploited by human traffickers.

The minister did not specify who among Malaysia's illegal immigrant population would be offered the chance to stay, nor were the terms under which they would be granted asylum immediately clear.

Malaysia is also seen as a staging post for trafficking gangs moving people from Afghanistan and Myanmar to Indonesia and Australia.

Malaysia hopes to launch the programme in July.

The waterway between Malaysia and neighbouring Indonesia is porous and therefore a popular smuggling and people-trafficking route.

Numerous boats have sunk with lives lost, most recently last week when a rickety boat capsized and seven illegal Indonesians went missing.

- AFP