

RCI on Sabah migrants unlikely, says cable
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A confidential US embassy cable puts little hope in the possibility of a royal commission of inquiry into Sabah's illegal immigrant problem, blaming it on the vested interests of "Mahathir-era politicians" in the state.

The cable, posted online by Wikileaks, alleged that the federal government and Umno had actively facilitated the issuance of Malaysian documents to illegal immigrants in exchange for political support.

The cable went on to claim that a retired senior intelligence official "frankly admitted" that former prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamed's (left) administration had "facilitated illegal immigration" from neighbouring Indonesia and the Philippines to "better balance the state's ethnic and religious equation".

The retired official allegedly said that this was a preventive measure to "ward off any future separatist sentiments in Sabah, in addition to attracting Umno votes needed to control the state".

"A royal commission, operated properly, would likely expose the depth of Umno and BN's political corruption and vote manipulation, further inciting Sabahans," stated the cable, dated Sept 5, 2008.

Sabah politicians and activists have long been demanding that the federal government fulfil its responsibilities in helping solve this long-standing issue, with many claiming that it started to get out of hand during the 1994 state elections when the then opposition PBS was toppled by the BN after a nine-year rule.

Among the demands put forward was for a RCI to be formed to probe the root causes of the state's burgeoning illegal immigrant problem.

The latest call came from Upko president and Plantation Industries and Commodities Minister Bernard Dompok, following the purported installation of a Sabah businessman as the Sultan of Sulu.

Crackdown on illegals 'political band aid'

This was, however, not the first time Dompok (right) had demanded a RCI, with the cable stating that he had told US embassy officials back in 2008 that the royal commission is needed to find out who are issuing Malaysian documents to illegal immigrants for any action to be effective.

Describing the periodic operations against the illegal migrants in Sabah as "political band aid", the cable pointed out that Sabahans "see the immigrants being deported as 'low hanging fruit', enabling authorities to demonstrate that they are 'doing something' about it".

The cable also quoted the then Suhakam vice-chairperson Simon Sipaun, who cited estimates of around 1.9 million illegals and/or undocumented people living in Sabah, far higher than the federal government's official estimates of 240,000.

Another person quoted in the cable, Muhammad Radzi Jamaludin who was principal assistant secretary in the Foreign Affairs Ministry's Southeast Asia division, allegedly conceded to US embassy officials that many Filipinos deported from Sabah returned after just "a couple weeks".

He added that some Malaysian women falsely claim Filipino citizenship, only to announce they are Malaysians upon reaching the Philippines and that they wanted to stay with their husbands, who were being deported.

Govt accused of 'selective crackdown'

The cable concluded that the federal government crackdowns on illegal immigrants in Sabah have been "selective" and "explicitly avoids raids on key areas of migrant employment" such as manufacturing, logging, palm oil plantations and service industries, "which could be forced to curtail operations without their illegal migrant workers".

A local journalist met by US embassy officials allegedly told them that an earlier damping down "that proved too effective" in detaining illegal immigrants after local business leaders complained and the police official who planned the operation was punished and transferred.

"Sabahans consider illegal immigration a major concern, even though important segments of the state's economy are highly dependent on cheap migrant labour.

"Many view illegal immigrants, especially Filipino Muslims, as upsetting the political balance in Sabah, whose native majority is Catholic.

"The lack of enthusiasm among Sabahans for current illegal immigrant crackdown illustrates the overall mistrust of the BN government and its peninsular-centric policies," the cable said.

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