

Non-Muslims given refugee status too, says DG

MalaysiaKini.com

July 2, 2013

By Nigel Aw

SABAH RCI Immigration Department director-general Alias Ahmad told the royal commission of inquiry (RCI) on immigrants today that the status of 'refugee' is not given only to Muslims.

NONETestifying before the RCI at the court complex in Kota Kinabalu, Alias (right) said it so happened that many Muslims from the Philippines were granted refugee status and this was due to the geographical factor.

"This is a consequence of the situation because our neighbouring countries are mostly made up of Muslims.

"It is a coincidence, but not all of them who receive refugee status are Muslims. There are also non-Muslims," Alias told the RCI.

He was responding to a question from the lawyer holding a watching brief for the Sabah Law Association, Ahmad Abdul Rahman, on the perception that only Muslims were granted refugee status.

These refugees from southern Philippines are given the IMM13 document which would effectively allow them to stay in Sabah and work there, he said

Furthermore, he added that the immigration department also recognised the 'kad burung-burung', a document issued to illegal immigrants during a registration process by the Sabah Chief Minister's Department (JKM).

The document has no identification purposes and is merely an acknowledgement slip that the illegal immigrant had been registered.

Alias acknowledged that the document was not legally recognised but it is "administratively recognised" as it is also issued by a government agency, in this case, the JKM.

"The same applies to the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (passes) which have no legal standing but are administratively recognised, the police do not arrest such holders," he explained.

'Gov't must decide on repatriation'

However, when it was pointed out by conducting officer Manoj Kurup that refugees holding UNHCR passes are repatriated when the conflict in their original country is over, but 'kad burung-burung holders' have remained here for decades, Alias acknowledged the problem.

NONE "I agree, but there must be a policy decision (from the government). If that happens, then the process (of repatriation) will happen," he said.

He added that it is difficult to send back long-time illegal immigrants as their country of origin do not see them as such.

"However, after the Lahad Datu intrusion, the Philippines have been more forthcoming in issuing travel documents for their people to return," he said.

Alias also acknowledged that travel document forgery is rampant but said matters can now be more effectively tackled with the newly-introduced biometric system.

"People can forge Malaysian documents and use them overseas but they will not work when entering Malaysia because we have biometric records," said Alias.

Former Chief Justice of Sabah and Sarawak Steve Shim (left), who is heading the commission, then pointed out that the integrity of the officers operating such high-tech gadget was more important than the gadgets themselves.

Alias acknowledged this, saying that he had also set up an "integrity division" within the Immigration Department which is led by a senior Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission officer.

However, Alias said his department only had power over gazetted entry points into Sabah but required cooperation from the navy and police for those entering Sabah through illegal routes.

'Blue IC in eight years'

Also taking the stand today was Marthen Salempang, 64 who was born in Sulawesi, Indonesia but managed to obtain a blue identity card.

Marthen, who is of the Toraja ethnic group, a largely Christian community in Sulawesi, said he arrived in Tawau, Sabah in 1970 with an Indonesian passport.

He then worked with a number of logging companies for eight years before he was approached by a woman known as 'Christina' who offered to help him get a blue identity card.

"I was taken to the Tawau native chief and he asked me to fill in a form, took my thumb prints and asked me to pay RM15," he said, adding that he also made a statutory declaration.

Marthen said he subsequently received his blue identity card which stated he was born in Tawau, and has voted in every election since 1981.

Prior to 1988, the National Registration Department accepted statutory declarations as evidence that one is Sabah-born and this was abused by foreigners to obtain citizenship.

Copyright © 1999-2012 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd
Source: <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/234557>