

Exco: Penang can't cope with refugees

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By Susan Loone

Detention camps run by the federal government are better equipped for sheltering boat people from Myanmar and Bangladesh, Penang executive councillor Phee Boon Poh says.

Phee said Penang is land-scarce, while hospitals and welfare facilities are at saturation point these days.

He said that capacities at the Penang Hospital and the Seberang Jaya Hospital were at 105 percent and even patients required to be warded in intensive care units have to be placed on waiting lists.

"According to our information, there are around 50,000 existing Rohingyas in Penang.

"Nothing had been done and they have been moving around in the state. And now, we are talking about another 7,000 of them," Phee (photo) said.

He also suggested that Putrajaya should consider converting national service training camps throughout the country into camps to house the refugees.

Yesterday, Home Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi criticised the Penang government for rejecting the police's suggestion to house refugees in the state.

Zahid said DAP, which rules Penang, was being hypocritical - championing human rights while refusing to take in refugees.

After facing international flak for turning away refugee boats, Putrajaya has decided to take in 7,000 people temporarily.

Phee said Penang respected the federal government's position and is willing to cooperate.

However, Phee said Putrajaya must consult Penang before making unilateral decisions on the state's land matters.

'Fate of refugees on very precarious thread'

Meanwhile, a spokesman for the NGO, Penang Stop Human Trafficking, expressed sadness that the fate of the women, men and children on the boat continued to hang by a very precarious thread.

The spokesperson said Malaysia is playing even more "political football" with their lives.

"We are very sure the federal authorities can work out satisfactorily with state

governments and other national and international agencies how best to welcome those needing refuge off the boats: that is really not the issue," the spokesperson told Malaysiakini.

"The hugely pressing issue is: where are the boats?"

"We have had no statement from Najib or anyone else about how many boats have been located, how many have been supported with urgent food and medicinal supplies, and how many have been escorted to a safe haven and ready to land?" the spokesperson said.

"So, can we please have such an update, to reassure us that boats have indeed been located and the people assisted, and that we are not idly talking while the women, men and children on the boats are being left to die?"

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