

US tightens visa waiver programme amidst security fears

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The United States government has tightened conditions in its visa waiver programme (VWP) amidst security concerns following the terror attacks in Europe and Turkey.

Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi said the matter was conveyed to him by US Deputy Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas during their meeting at the latter's office in Washington yesterday.

The new conditions affect not just countries applying to join the programme but also countries that are already in the programme, he told Malaysian reporters after his meeting with Mayorkas.

Zahid said the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) had expressed its willingness to assist Malaysia in meeting the statutory conditions.

In light of the additional conditions, Malaysia's application to join the VWP would be subjected to monitoring for one year as regards applications from Malaysians for US visa, that had been rejected.

The monitoring period would be based on the US fiscal year beginning Oct 1, 2016 till Sept 31, 2017, said Zahid.

According to him, the percentage of rejected applications currently stood at 3.34 percent, exceeding the requirement of below three percent set by the US.

If the percentage drops to below three percent throughout the fiscal year, only then can Malaysia participate in the programme, by as late as 2018, he said.

Yesterday, the deputy prime minister cited the reason for the rejection as technical, that is, mistakes made when filling up the application forms.

He said the DHS also noted Malaysia's efforts and success in meeting the statutory conditions in the VWP.

"Malaysia will remain committed in fulfilling all the statutory conditions to ensure that we would be in the VWP by as late as 2018," he said.

Zahid said he and Mayorkas also discussed about disaster management and US had offered a template of its federal emergency management agency's (FEMA) standard operating procedure to apply in Malaysia.

The US had also agreed to provide training to Malaysia's National Disaster Management

Agency officers.

He said Malaysia would take up the offer based on the need and circumstances.

Zahid noted that FEMA has an organised disaster management structure, having undergone improvements in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005.

"The assistance offered by US is more on expertise and technical particularly in occurrence of major disasters," he added.

Zahid, who is also National Disaster Committee chairman, also revealed that US had invited the agency's senior officers to attend a top management national disaster course in Atlanta in Summer.

"It concerns international disaster management and an opportunity not to be missed.

"An officer from the agency is currently undergoing training conducted by FEMA in Hawaii," he said.

- Bernama

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