

Visit Malaysia: Dream or nightmare?
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Awoken by loud banging and shouting, dragged out of bed in the breaking hours of the morning by a militantly dressed brigade, herded down to the street and forced to squat for hours on the dirty pavement, unable to speak, unable to question and stripped of basic freedoms and human dignity.

Welcome to Malaysia.

For an increasing number of visitors arriving during the "Visit Malaysia Year 2007: Truly Asia" promotion, this has been their experience in Malaysia.

But what do tourists expect from a country that consistently flouts international human rights laws and basic freedoms?

For tourists, nighttime raids and arbitrary arrests may be a new and uninviting experience. For the tens of thousands of asylum-seekers and refugees living within Malaysia's borders, this is the daily reality- only worse because there are no embassies to turn to or passports to rely on.

This year, the Ministry of Tourism launched the "Visit Malaysia 2007: Truly Asia" campaign in celebration of Malaysia's 50 years of nationhood. However, in a nation that continues to lack respect for basic individual human rights and freedoms, Malaysia is not the ideal vacation spot.

Malaysia has been repeatedly cited as a regular violator of basic rights and freedoms. Thousands of UNHCR-recognised refugees and asylum seekers, including pregnant women and very young children, have been rounded up, terrorised, and detained merely for existing within Malaysia's borders.

According to Suaram, a Malaysia-based human rights organisation, at the end of 2006, 732 asylum seekers and refugees remained in detention. This number included 278 UNHCR recognised refugees, 86 women, and 92 children. Increasingly, those arrested on immigration charges are caned. The canings leave deep, indelible scars on their backsides - a sort of souvenir of their unforgettable time in Malaysia. Conditions inside Malaysia's immigration detention facilities rise to the level of torture, with prisoners being given inadequate food, clothing, and accommodations, in addition to being subjected to various types of abuses by the guards.

The immigration authorities and those mandated with enforcing Malaysia's immigration policy are particularly notorious for their abuse of power and overly-aggressive tactics. Rela, the controversial, untrained volunteer corp, focused on targeting and harassing undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, have been the subject of repeated complaints. Recently the Malaysian Bar called for their immediate disbandment.

The Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (Suhakam) have also criticised Rela for their lack of respect to individual human rights. Rela is once again striking public discord as tourists are caught up in their mismanaged raids. Now, more than it is clear that Malaysia must deal immediately and decisively with Rela.

No human rights: No tourism

Despite the attempt to portray Malaysia as a tourist-friendly destination, an increasing number of tourists with valid travel documents have been arbitrarily arrested and subjected to abusive detention conditions for varying periods of time. In one ironic incident, a film producer was wrongly arrested while in Malaysia to produce a film on "dream" hotels intended to boost tourism in Malaysia. The dream turned into a nightmare when he was surrounded by seven untrained enforcement agents, thrown into a lorry, and detained without cause.

Tourists staying in the heart of Kuala Lumpur's city center are not immune to immigration raids conducted in the middle of the night, often by mismanaged and irreverent Rela forces. Other tourists have been rounded up while simply walking Kuala Lumpur's streets.

In describing the circumstances of their arrests, conditions of their detainment and their treatment by the Malaysian authorities, victims described their experience in Malaysia as the worst of their lifetime.

One of the victims, lawyer Wayne Wright, speaking to BBC International, said he was treated like "something worse than a dog," describing how he was fed only bread and water, denied the use of the toilet, and refused permission to contact the US embassy, despite the fact that he was traveling on a US passport with a valid tourist visa.

For most tourists in Malaysia, the only thing they will see are gleaming glass towers, long stretches of modern shopping malls, and a developed transportation system. However, modernity is no substitute for human rights.

As tourists become aware of and experience themselves the raids and abuses that occur regularly in Malaysia, Malaysia will learn that where there is no room for human rights, there is no room for tourists- especially as Malaysia competes with many amazing and wondrous destinations in Asia that don't require a surrender of basic freedoms.

Malaysia must determine what is "Truly Asia" before the world judges for itself.

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