

Illegals - the perennial nightmare
Malaysiakini.com
Aug 1, 2008
Joe Fernandez

Malaysians in Sabah, a stone's throw from Manila and Hong Kong as the crow flies and bordering Indonesia on the landward side, not surprisingly have had a love-hate relationship with the hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants in their midst, in recent years, as the pace of globalization gathers momentum and renders governments everywhere increasingly vulnerable, hapless and powerless.
MCPX

Sabah may be the only state in Malaysia where as many as 60 percent of the unofficially estimated 3.5 million population are either overwhelmingly illegal immigrants, over-stayers, stateless or ex-illegals. Legal immigrants form just a fraction and number in the low hundred thousands.

Official estimates vary but local authorities put the number of illegals from the Philippines alone at 130,000, a figure disputed by politicians who think the figure is closer to 500,000. The Philippines government itself has come up with a figure of 200,000 including 3,000 in detention awaiting deportation, according to figures cited this week by the Philippine Daily Inquirer.

sabah illegal immigrant"Historically, Sabah has been a destination for the people of Sulu and Tawi-Tawi. It has always been a haven for Filipino job seekers because of its geographical location/proximity to South & Western Mindanao and the opportunities it offers. Due to the limited opportunities and low salaries in the Philippines, Filipinos are prompted to take the risks of going to Malaysia, via backdoor Tawi-Tawi, the Southern frontier of the Philippines," adds the PDI report.

It is not known whether the illegal immigrant menace in Sabah is mostly Filipino in the making or Indonesian. While Filipinos hog all the headlines for criminal activity, unlike the introverted illegal Indonesian colonies, the best guess-estimates out the Indonesian figure at about twice that from the Philippines. Tawau along the east coast, on the border with East Kalimantan in Indonesian Borneo, looks very much like a town in Indonesia rather than in Malaysia.

It has been mostly the hate factor at work since the March 8, 2008 political tsunami which saw five of the richest states and the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur come under opposition rule. MPs (member of Parliament) from Sabah, emboldened by their newly-found importance in the formation of the Federal Government have demanded that Kuala Lumpur deport the illegal immigrants or else ...

Mass deportations

A high-powered cabinet committee chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak resolved they would comply with the demands and has since set the logistics in motion for mass deportations to begin in August.

Expulsion of course would benefit local politicians in more ways than one. Besides pleasing their core vote banks and diehard supporters, expulsion can translate into big bucks, ringgit and sen-wise, should the illegals return as expected through legal channels. Would be foreign

job-seekers in many sectors in Malaysia have to go through a labour agency, most of whom are politically well-connected. Every illegal tolerated means revenue losses for these agencies as well as the insurance and medical community who conduct the compulsory check-ups and health screening on hired labour.

It is an onerous process which includes employers paying a levy, in lieu of taxes foregone it is said, for every foreign worker employed. There have been calls to simplify the entire process and even "backdating" the procedures. "Illegals rounded up next month should not be repatriated straightaway," suggests Sebatik state assemblyman, Abdul Muis Picho. "The government should set up one-stop centres together with the Philippine and Indonesian embassies to issue the necessary documents to the illegals to facilitate their recruitment for work by their employers."

The Federation of Chinese Associations Sabah (FCAS) have made similar conciliatory remarks. "A massive deportation to deport illegal immigrants would cripple many industries such as construction, manufacturing and the agricultural sector, This would be detrimental to the state's economy, " said FCAS president Nuar Tan in remarks to the media on the sidelines after handing over 12 resolutions and four memorandums to Chief Minister Musa Aman this week in Kota Kinabalu. "We would urge the Federal and state governments to give the illegal immigrants an amnesty period like what has been done years before." He further proposed that illegal immigrants who have been in the state for at least 15 years be legalized and given citizenships if they have no police or criminal record.

The legalization proposal has drawn flak primarily because there are several thousand permanent residents, holders of red identity cards, who are yet to obtain their citizenship papers. This includes children of Malaysians born overseas without having themselves registered at the nearest mission within the mandatory one year. "Such a proposal is both mind-boggling and unwarranted as it sends a wrong signal that the state is encouraging the influx of illegal immigrants," said Assistant Finance Minister Melanie Chia. "FCAS should not get itself mixed up between the illegal immigrants, legal foreign workers and refugees holding IMM13 papers from the Immigration Department."

"FCAS should not in any way create or cause to create a false or wrong impression that a person of another country could easily obtain citizenship of this country if they have lived here illegally for more than 15 years. There's a stringent procedure to follow if one is to apply to be even a permanent resident."

"The government's deportation plans are a gimmick and don't really address the genuine concerns of the people on the issue," points out a senior political analyst in Kota Kinabalu. "Deportation merely camouflages the real issues."

Malaysian documents

According to the analyst, the issue is not the illegals per se but those who obtain Malaysian personal documents illegally and get on the electoral rolls. This widespread scam has been at the expense of the Kadazandusun-Murut community in particular. They have seen their number of seats in the state legislature whittled down from a majority to less than a third. The Chinese and local Muslim communities too now feel an erosion in their political strength as a result of the illegals getting on the electoral rolls. Hence, the recent outburst by SAPP (Sabah Progressive Party) president, Datuk Yong Teck Lee, when he proposed a no confidence motion against Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi. His party faces imminent expulsion from the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition.

Illegal immigrants by whatever term . . . pendatang tanpa izin (PTI) or arrivals without permission . . . pendatang asing tanpa izin (Pati) or foreign arrivals without permission . . . are an intriguing phenomenon in more ways than one. They are certainly not wanted whether by the people of the land, old and new, or the state. They are the butt of jokes and stereotypes, caricatured in newspaper cartoons and the perennial scapegoats for all the ills that beset society.

Yet, one cannot do without them either in so many ways . . . in the farms and fisheries, on construction sites, in the factories and estates, in the households and across a broad spectrum of economic activities in the towns and cities that dot the length and breadth of the country. They fill the massage parlours and fleshpots and walk on the seedy side of life in the drug trade for example, smuggling across the three seas and fencing of stolen goods and are invariably accused of being home-wreckers. They rule the underworld which have links with their home countries, the Philippines and Indonesia, where there's a thin line between the criminals and terrorists. There's a thin line with the local cops as well.

Bestow citizenship status on the illegals and they are instantly transformed into Malaysians with the very same qualities which created the loopholes which allowed the illegals to flood into the land. Their children curse the illegals as well in true Malaysian fashion, denying that they were ever Filipinos or Indonesians not so long ago, and wish them out except for the ones they know or need. This has become a perennial nightmare which feeds on Malaysia's insatiable demand for foreign labour.

At one time, it was the Indians and Chinese who were the most upset for political reasons over the illegals stalking the land, prompting puzzled looks among the newcomers. "If Malaysia can accept so many Indians and Chinese as citizens, why can't they accept us, just from right next door?" is the perennial question that most illegals have on their lips, unmindful of the history of Malaysia as a microcosm of the British Empire. Now Malays and other native Malaysians as well have joined the Indians and Chinese with a chorus of complaints against illegal immigrants. The initial goodwill has evaporated especially since they realise that it doesn't help them politically either in the numbers game with the non-Malays as evident from the results of the March 8 polls. Besides, illegal immigrants compete more these days with Malays and other native Malaysians at the bottom of the dung heap, rather than with the Indians and Chinese.

Filipinos and Indonesians are not the only illegals in Malaysia although they form the overwhelming majority due to proximity. There may be illegals from as many as 100 over countries in Malaysia including from the Indian subcontinent, China, Africa and even many western countries. These are the over-stayers i.e. those who come in legally and then disappear. There are no records of them ever leaving the country.

One statistic provided by the authorities, by way of illustration, is that there are at least 50,000 over-stayers from mainland Chinese. Many came in either as students wishing to learn the English language or as tourists. Many English language students were later found working in karaoke clubs and nightclubs. Their inability to speak Malay gives them away. Given the level of corruption in the police and immigration, it's quite easy for the over-stayers to be in business as usual until they become stateless and escape deportation. Even more over-stayers can be expected from China in the future now that Air Asia has mounted regular flights to that country in a quest for more tourists.

JOE FERNANDEZ is an educationist and former newspaper editor and ex-civil servant who feels compelled to put pen to paper when something doesn't quite jell with his weltanschauung (worldview).

Copyright © 1999-2007 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd.
Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/87108>