

Eminent persons to tackle issues

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PUTRAJAYA: Malaysia and Indonesia will set up an eminent persons group of seven representatives each to address issues affecting bilateral ties, among them migrant labour, culture, border disputes, religion and the economy.

The idea was proposed by Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi yesterday, during the leaders' annual bilateral consultation.

Abdullah welcomed Susilo's proposal and said the group would monitor the issues and forward their views to their respective authorities.

"The countries' leaders can then decide what should be implemented to ensure that disputes in these areas do not draw negative reactions from their people," he said at a joint press conference with Susilo after their meeting.

Abdullah also said he explained the status of 17 high-profile cases involving Indonesians in Malaysia, including that of domestic helper Nirmala Bonat's alleged abuse by her employer, and the alleged beating of Indonesian karate coach Donald Pieter Luther Kolo-

pita by Malaysian policemen.

"I explained the cases one by one. Our stand remains that Indonesian workers have contributed a lot to Malaysia's economy and we accept and welcome them.

"I said we do not discriminate against Indonesian workers and we give them the opportunity to work as long as they fulfil the conditions."

Abdullah and Susilo echoed each other in appealing to Indonesian workers here to ensure they had legal documents and that they obeyed Malaysian laws.

Abdullah said the Indonesian embassy here would be informed of court hearings for the high-profile cases so that a diplomatic representative can attend the trials.

"If they want to send officials from Jakarta, we will also allow that," he said.

Susilo, meanwhile, called for tighter policies and mechanisms to ensure that the presence of Indonesian workers in Malaysia would bring benefit to both countries.

"I thank Malaysia for accepting our workers. We only ask for fair treatment and protection so that they can contribute to Malaysia's growth and to Indonesia's benefit.

"There are already several policies in place but we wish for a stronger mechanism to take us

forward in the coming years," Susilo said.

He added that discussions on foreign workers were held in an open and transparent manner.

The leaders also agreed that dialogue between the Indonesian and Malaysian press be held regularly to avert misunderstandings and inaccurate reporting on issues.

"I agree that we should have an inter-media dialogue mechanism to discuss issues and to get the right background information and understanding.

"Then both media can ensure that correct information is reported and that there is no misinterpretation," Abdullah said.

Also discussed were boundary disputes over the Ambalat block, about which Susilo called on negotiating teams to work more effectively to bring the matter to a conclusion.

He said other concerns that Indonesia shared with Malaysia were joint defence responsibilities in the Straits of Malacca, global warming from illegal logging and slash-and-burn farming, simplification of student visa procedures to encourage youth and student exchanges between both countries, and increases in the number of Indonesian teachers for children of migrant workers here.