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'Our citizens held **hostage**'

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> PM orders IGP to stop North Koreans from leaving country after similar action by Pyongyang on Malaysians

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KUALA LUMPUR: North Korea citizens in Malaysia are now barred from leaving.

In an immediate response to an earlier move by Pyongyang to prohibit the departure of Malaysians currently in North Korea, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Abdul Razak said he has instructed the inspector-general of police to stop North Koreans from leaving the country until the safety of all Malaysians in North Korea has been assured.

While condemning North Korea's action, Najib said he has summoned an emergency meeting of the National Security Council to deliberate on the matter.

"This abhorrent act, effectively holding our citizens hostage, is in total disregard of all international laws and diplomatic norms."

He said the government hopes for a swift resolution and urged the North Korean leadership to immediately allow Malaysians to leave "to avoid any further escalation".

"As a peace-loving nation, Malaysia is committed to maintaining friendly relations with all countries.

"However, protecting our citizens is my first priority, and we will not hesitate to take all measures necessary when they are threatened," Najib said in a statement.

Earlier, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi told a press conference in Parliament that Malaysia has been forced to impose the counter-action as North Korea had crossed the limits.

"This is what we have to do when a country that has diplomatic ties with Malaysia does something that is beyond norms and diplomacy.

"Malaysia is forced to take the same action because they have manipulated the Kim Jong-Nam murder case.

"We want to send a clear message to never point fingers at Malaysia and never belittle Malaysia and its sovereignty," he said.

Ahmad Zahid said severing diplomatic ties with North Korea will be discussed at the Cabinet meeting on Friday.

Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Datuk Seri Reezal Merican Naina Merican told reporters at Parliament lobby that the North Korean protocol division had given an assurance on the safety of 11 Malaysians in North Korea, comprising three staff from the Malaysian embassy and eight others who are their family members.

It was reported that North Korean state media had stated Malaysian citizens are barred from leaving the country.

This comes after North Korean ambassador Kang Chol, who was declared *persona non grata*, left Malaysia on Monday.