

Malaysia, Australia sign refugee swap deal
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by Joseph Chin

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia and Australia signed an agreement to swap refugees and asylum seekers, which was the first of its kind in the world.

According to Bernama, the agreement which was signed on Monday, July 25, was aimed in the long run at checking human trafficking and other cross border criminal activities.

The pact, which takes effect at midnight, is for the exchange of 4,000 refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia for 800 in Australia over four years.

Home Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein signed for Malaysia while Australian Minister for Immigration and Citizenship Chris Bowen represented his country, according to Bernama.

Hishammuddin told reporters after the signing: "We are sending a very strong message to the human traffickers that we are taking this matter very seriously."

However, Tenaganita executive director Dr Irene Fernandez said the refugee deal lacked transparency in the way the agreement has come through on Monday.

"The Malaysian government has not made known the process, the issues and the terms and conditions of this swap deal. There has been a lack of consultation as well with refugee organisations and advocates for refugee rights protection," she said.

Though Prime Minister Julia Gillard stated that Australia would make sure that Malaysia provides written assurances on protection of rights of asylum seekers, "we are doubtful as assurances do not mean a commitment to rights protection".

Fernandez said she was concerned the deal would probably lead to discriminatory practices in the management of refugees where the 800 asylum seekers may get preferential treatment.

And for the 4,000 refugees who will be settled, these were already processed and would probably be refugees from Burma. The deal would also create stress at the community level for opportunity for resettlement.

"Tenaganita does not see how this form of outsourcing of processing to Malaysia on asylum seekers can control trafficking in persons. Both countries do not seem to understand the lives of potential refugees. Refugees flee to save their lives from death and persecution. Even with the deal, refugees will flee if conditions in countries of conflict, disaster and forms of discrimination intensify. People in a vulnerable condition will find ways to go to a safer environment," she said.