

Malaysia signs refugee swap with Australia
The Malaysian Insider
July 25, 2011

KUALA LUMPUR, July 25 — Malaysia signed today the asylum swap deal with Pacific neighbours Australia despite continued opposition from human rights activists in both countries.

Under the deal revealed in May, Australia and Malaysia agreed to deport 800 asylum seekers arriving on Australian shores to Malaysia for processing.



Hishammuddin and Australia's Immigration Minister Chris Bowen (right) talk as they arrive for the signing ceremony in Kuala Lumpur on July 25, 2011. — Reuters pic

In exchange, Australia will expand its humanitarian intake and resettle 4,000 refugees from Malaysia over four years and foot the bill of nearly RM1 billion.

The deal, which has been condemned by the Australian Parliament, has seen the popularity of its leader Julia Gillard and her Labor government lag behind that of the opposition coalition.

The Australian legislature is set to censure Prime Minister Gillard over the deal with Malaysia, which is not a signatory to a United Nations covenant on the status of refugees.

Home Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein said today that Malaysia did not sign the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees as "it is not able to offer access to education opportunities, jobs, safe haven and food to refugees as Malaysians themselves need help in these aspects".

Hishammuddin, who inked the deal with Australian Immigration and Citizenship Minister Chris Bowen, added that Malaysia now had 84,000 refugees, mainly from Myanmar.

"This proves that despite not being part of the convention, it is still a destination for a large number of refugees who feel safe in this country," Hishammuddin, a vice-president of Umno, said.

He said both the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) would have roles to play in the processing and hosting of the refugees.

"With the UNHCR and IOM on board, they will ensure that the benchmark set will be on par with other developed countries," the Sembrong MP said.

The two ministers also declared that the move was just the first step in a bigger bilateral agenda to tackle the issue of human trafficking, which Bowen said would "pull the rug out from under the people smugglers".

Hishammuddin also told reporters that there was no time limit set for how long the 800 arrivals would be allowed to stay in Malaysia, but that while they were in the country, they would be allowed to work and be given access to education and health care.

Bowen told a press conference later that the process of identifying the 800 asylum seekers to be sent to Malaysia would begin with arrivals starting from midnight today.

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