

Putrajaya: Canberra committed to 'Malaysia Solution'
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By Clara Chooi

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 10 — Putrajaya expressed confidence today in Canberra's commitment to a contentious refugee swap agreement, despite reports that the deal will be rejected in the Australian Parliament this week.

In a written reply to Teresa Kok (DAP-Seputeh) today, the Home Ministry said the deal would help improve Malaysia's international image and credibility in combating cross-border crimes, particularly human trafficking.

Kok had asked the ministry to reveal the number of refugees from Malaysia that have been sent to Australia under the "Malaysia Solution", before the agreement was declared invalid by the High Court in Australia on August 31.

"Following the (Australian) High Court's decision to issue an injunction forbidding the transfer of asylum seekers to Malaysia, the plan could not be carried out.

"However, Australia will proceed with its commitment to accept 4,000 refugees from Malaysia that have been registered with the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) to be resettled there," the ministry said.

It also pledged Putrajaya's commitment to co-operate with Canberra, UNHCR and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM).

"The benefit for Malaysia in proceeding with this co-operation with Australia is that it could help resolve the growing refugee issue here.

"Apart from that, it could also increase the number of refugees entering Australia for resettlement," the ministry said.

In a separate written response today, Minister in the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Nazri Aziz told Lim Lip Eng (DAP-Segambut) that until August this year, there were 94,843 "persons of concern" in Malaysia, including 83,993 refugees and 10,850 asylum seekers.

Of the total, Nazri said 67,145 were men and the rest women, with a majority of the group from Myanmar (7,582 asylum seekers).

Despite Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard's recent assurance to Putrajaya of her commitment towards the refugee swap deal, her Labor government is expected to be defeated by one vote in Parliament this week.

The Sydney Morning Herald (SMH) reported on Saturday that one lawmaker, West Australian Nationals MP Tony Crook, currently stands in the way of the bill's smooth passage.

SMH also pointed out that should Crook cave to pressure and support the bill, the proposed

amendments to the Migration Act could still fail with the Greens and Coalition likely block it in the Senate.

Gillard reportedly placed a phone call to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak several weeks back to assure him that her government remained steadfast on the refugee swap deal, which has raised human rights concerns in both nations.

Gillard's controversial refugee swap deal with Malaysia faced its first defeat on August 31, when the High Court declared it invalid as Canberra could not ensure protection for asylum seekers sent to Malaysia, which is not a signatory to the UN refugee convention.

Determined to press on, Gillard mooted amendments to Australia's Migration Act, which is scheduled to be voted on this week, but Opposition Leader Tony Abbott has already declared his refusal to support the deal, forcing the premier's plans to go awry again.

Under Gillard's original deal, informally called the "Malaysia Solution", Australia plans to send 800 asylum seekers to Malaysia where their refugee claims would be assessed in return for accepting 4,000 refugees from Malaysia.

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