

**Dr M 'insensitive' for defending Sabah illegals, says UPKO
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By Clara Chooi**

KOTA KINABALU, Aug 9 — A Sabah-based Barisan Nasional (BN) party today condemned Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad for his "insensitive" defence of Sabah's increasing migrant population, an emotive issue that will likely be central to the pact's campaign for the state in the coming polls.

The United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (UPKO) said in a statement here that Dr Mahathir, whom the opposition has blamed for Sabah's unchecked population increase, had confused the state's illegal immigrants with its legal migrants.

"Legal migrants are foreigners who enter Malaysia legally with the requisite visa or work permit endorsed on their passports from their respective country of origin, who later decide to apply for Malaysian citizenship," UPKO information chief Datuk Donald Peter Mojuntin reminded the country's longest serving prime minister.

"Illegal immigrants are those who enter Malaysia without any passports or travel documentation," he said.

The Penampang MP pointed out to Dr Mahathir (picture) that the key concern in the issue was over allegations that illegal immigrants have been given Malaysian identification cards very quickly through "dubious means" and that their names have also entered the state's electoral roll.

He noted that several Filipino migrants have even admitted during previous interviews with local Sabah dailies that they had obtained their MyKads through "Projek IC" and were photographed holding up their cards.

Mojuntin recalled the 1999 Likas election petition case at a High Court here, where a Filipino named Fuad Ari from Tawi-Tawi island had testified that he had obtained his identification card through "Projek IC".

In the same case, he added, another witness called Hassnar Ibrahim had also admitted to being directly involved in "Projek IC".

"Various books have been written about the existence of 'Projek IC'. Since the 1980s, there have been so many Sabahans from the grassroots level to community and political leaders voicing their concerns about this issue," Mojuntin said.

"UPKO and genuine Sabahans are very disappointed with and angered by the insensitive statement by Dr Mahathir.

"This a real and serious issue that affects the lives of genuine Malaysian citizens in Sabah and the problem may have already seeped to the peninsula.

"It concerns national security, economic and job opportunities as well as health issues. It has tarnished our electoral rolls," he said.

Dr Mahathir has long been accused of spearheading "Project IC", an initiative to award foreigners Malaysian citizenships in exchange for votes in the east Malaysian state, allegedly to help keep the ruling BN in power.

The apparent correlation between Sabah's population boom with Dr Mahathir's tenure from 1981 to 2003 has drawn even more suspicion to the influential leader's alleged involvement in the matter.

But the former prime minister, in an apparent move to quieten the uproar over the longstanding issue, yesterday wrote in his blog that many migrants in Sabah were qualified to be given Malaysian citizenships as they have stayed in the country for decades and speak Bahasa Malaysia.

"On the basis of length of stay and mastering of the national language, they qualify to be citizens of this country. And so they acquired citizenship.

"By comparison we have many citizens who cannot speak the national language who were accepted as citizens. And we are still giving citizenship to foreigners who wish to be Malaysians on condition they have been living in this country for 10 out of the last 12 years, speak the national language and take the oath of allegiance to the country.

"So why cannot the migrants to Sabah who have all these qualifications be accepted as citizens? The objections for them being accepted seem to be political," he said.

Dr Mahathir's words may have bruised BN badly, particularly as it comes at a crucial time for the once-formidable Sabah BN, which was just hit by the departures of two senior BN federal lawmakers.

The lawmakers - Tuaran MP Datuk Seri Wilfred Mojilip Bumburing, formerly UPKO's deputy president, and Beaufort MP Datuk Seri Lajim Ukin - had left their respective posts in BN to pledge support for Pakatan Rakyat (PR) last month, citing dissatisfaction with the government's apparent inaction over the state's immigrant issue.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak is scheduled to visit the state this Saturday in an apparent move to head off further revolt over the matter, and is expected to announce the terms of reference for the highly-anticipated Royal Commission of Inquiry (RCI) into Sabah's illegal immigrants problem.

Najib had announced the highly-anticipated RCI on Sabah's illegals issue on June 1 but stopped short of revealing details of the panel's composition and terms of reference.

The issue has been bandied about in the media for nearly six months since February 10 when Sabah BN leader Tan Sri Bernard Dompok's first announced Cabinet's decision to form the RCI.

The unchecked influx of illegal immigrants in Sabah has been a longstanding problem in the BN-ruled state, and frequently blamed for the rise in social, economic and security problems suffered by the locals here.

According to replies provided in Parliament last year, Sabah's populace numbered 651,304 in 1970 and grew to 929,299 a decade later. But in the two decades following 1980, the state's population rose significantly by a staggering 1.5 million people, reaching 2,468,246 by 2000.

Media reports said that as of 2010, this number has grown further to 3.12 million, with foreigners making up a sizeable 27 per cent or 889,799 of the population.

Opposition leaders have long raged against the BN government for this population explosion, alleging that illegals have been allowed into the east Malaysian state, and given MyKads and voting rights to help the ruling coalition cling to power.

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