

Panel tackles Sabah's long-standing headache
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MOTHER OF ALL PROBLEMS: Illegal immigrants are linked to issues such as security, health and politics

OVER the next few weeks in Sabah, all ears will be on the public hearing being conducted by the Royal Commission of Inquiry (RCI) on the long-standing illegal immigrant problem in the state.

The hearing, which began last Monday, has generated huge interest from the people in the state who are hoping that a permanent solution to the problem could finally be found.

The commencement of the RCI hearing is a testimony to the Barisan Nasional government's commitment to fulfil its promise of solving problems and issues faced by the people.

Described by many as the "mother of all problems in Sabah", the influx of illegal immigrants in the state has been a great concern among locals, who feared that they may eventually be outnumbered by aliens unless concrete and tough measures are taken to address the problem.

Indeed, Sabah folk were relieved and thankful to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak when he agreed to the request put forth by state Barisan Nasional component parties for the formation of the RCI.

As the problem is also a key political issue in Sabah, the bold decision by Najib had taken the opposition by surprise as they never expected that the RCI would ever become a reality.

Perhaps, knowing that they could no longer capitalise on the issue for political gains, the opposition until now are still claiming credit for the formation of the RCI by hoodwinking the people that it would not have been set up if not for the pressure they exerted on the ruling party.

But at the same time, they also belittled the RCI, questioning its ability and sincerity to get to the root of the problem and recommend solutions. Typical of the opposition, it is all about scoring political points.

Instead of questioning the commitment and sincerity of the government, the opposition should cooperate with the RCI by offering whatever information they have that could lead to the formulation of concrete measures to solve the problem.

In announcing the formation of the RCI in September last year, Najib expressed the hope that its five-member panel would get to the bottom of the problem and leave no stone unturned in their investigation.

RCI is seen as a strategic component of Najib's national transformation agenda as the illegal immigrant problem is also associated with issues such as citizenship, security, socio-economy, health and politics.

Headed by former chief judge of Sabah and Sarawak Tan Sri Steve Shim Lip Kiong, the RCI panel members comprise former Universiti Malaysia Sabah vice-chancellor Prof Datuk Seri Dr Kamaruzaman Ampon, former Kuala Lumpur police chief Datuk Henry Chin Poy Wu, former state secretary Datuk Kee Mustafa, and former state attorney-general Tan Sri Herman Luping.

The panel will have the tedious task of, among others, investigating allegations that many of the illegal immigrants have been issued Malaysian identity cards or citizenship and have registered as voters.

Also listed in the RCI's terms of reference is probing whether the issuance of blue identity cards or citizenship to the immigrants was made based on the law and whether the authorities had taken any action or made efforts to improve standard operating procedures, methods and regulations to avoid non-uniformity with the law in regard to the matter.

It will also investigate whether matters pertaining to the standard operating procedures, methods and regulations on the issuance of the blue identity cards or citizenship to immigrants in Sabah take into account international standards and norms in Malaysia.

The RCI was initially expected to call about 50 people for the hearing, but the New Straits Times has learnt that the number of witnesses could exceed 100, including at least two former chief ministers and several former senior civil servants.

This in itself is proof of the RCI's seriousness in conducting a comprehensive investigation into the matter.

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