

Dr Mahathir quizzed by ex-Chief Justice of Sabah, Sarawak at inquiry
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BY LEE SHI-IAN

Former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad agreed that the issue of illegal immigrants in Sabah was a very serious problem, but added that resolving the problem also depended on who was running the country.

He told the chairman of the Royal Commission of Inquiry on illegal immigrants in Sabah, Tan Sri Steve Shim Lip Kiong, that during his tenure as prime minister between 1981 and 2003, he had issued instructions to his officers to consider identity card applications and to act according to the law.

Shim, the former Chief Justice of Sabah and Sarawak, said many Sabahans had the general perception that the influx of illegal immigrants into the state was a serious problem but the government didn't seem to be doing anything to resolve it.

"Yes, it's true. It is a serious problem which has existed for decades. But resolving the issue does depend on who is the person-in-charge at that moment," said Dr Mahathir.

Shim: A previous witness, former Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Seri Yong Teck Lee said he had told you of the potential threats Sabah faced due to the influx of illegal immigrants?

Dr Mahathir: Yes, I do remember talking to several leaders from Sabah on this matter. I also remember telling them that the government would help to resolve the problem.

Shim: Former deputy Home Minister Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting visited Sabah in the 1990s and announced the formation of a special task force to conduct a regularisation programme. Are you aware of this?

Dr Mahathir: No, I don't remember this. But then maybe it was the opinion of the deputy Home Minister at that time as he may have heard the complaints made by several ministers in Sabah?

Shim: Former Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Seri Joseph Pairin Kitingan also visited your successor, Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, and presented a memo to him regarding the issue of illegal immigrants in the state. Are you aware of this fact?

Dr Mahathir: No, I didn't follow up on this issue after I stepped down from office. I am not aware of the meeting between Abdullah and the Sabah ministers.

"I am also unaware of an open letter purportedly written by former Sandakan district chief officer Hassnar Ebrahim," Dr Mahathir told Shim, who pointed out that it had been attached to a memo presented by the PBS leadership in 2002.

Dr Mahathir said he didn't consider illegal immigrants who came to Malaysia from Indonesia and the Philippines as refugees, saying that they had been staying in Malaysia for a long time and qualified as being residents of the country.

"We have deported illegal immigrants from Indonesia and The Philippines, but they return the next day and hide out in the water villages. Even the Royal Malaysian Navy has

admitted to me it was very tough to patrol the coastal waters of Sabah," he said.

Sabah Law Association representative Ansari Abdullah later asked the country's longest serving premier why those who had been detained under the Internal Security Act for issuing identity cards indiscriminately to immigrants were rewarded when they were released.

Ansari: According to National Registration Department Director-General Datuk Jariah Mohd Said, there are more than 100,000 problematic identity card holders in Sabah. But you say that only qualified and eligible foreigners are issued identity cards.

Dr Mahathir: Well, there are provisions in the law to revoke the identity cards from these illegal immigrants if they are not qualified to have one. But these people have lived here for a very long time and can even speak our language, they regard themselves as Malaysians.

Ansari: If that is the case, why is it so easy for these immigrants to apply for identity cards without going through the proper procedures?

Dr Mahathir: This is not what the government wants to see and certainly not the policy. It is quite obvious that somebody somewhere is not doing the right thing.

Ansari: Joseph also told this RCI that during his tenure as the state's chief minister, he was removed as the chairman of the state security council. Can you explain why a chief minister who was democratically elected was removed from this important position?

Dr Mahathir: The security of the country and the state is a federal matter. If there is a person or individual who isn't trusted, perhaps by the government, then he doesn't have a say on any matters pertaining to security.

At this juncture, Shim interjected, saying that by convention, Joseph should have been made chairman of the state security council. He asked Dr Mahathir the reason Joseph was relieved of his position.

"I don't know the exact reason but there were many reasons," Dr Mahathir replied.

He was also asked about Datuk Abdul Rauf Sani and Ramli Kamaruddin, both senior officers with the National Security Council who were seconded to the Sabah NRD and subsequently detained under the Internal Security Act.

"Obviously, some identity cards were issued to applicants without the due procedures being followed. I am sure that they were detained under the ISA for some reason related to identity cards. We don't normally detain people under the ISA for no reason," Dr Mahathir dryly remarked, drawing laughter from the gallery.

Counsel Alex Decena then told Dr Mahathir that due to political interference and lack of political will, the situation in Sabah had deteriorated to an extent where the influx of illegal immigrants was now uncontrollable.

"I can't vouch for other politicians but during my time, everything was done according to the law," Dr Mahathir replied. He said other countries didn't recognise their own citizens and they had nowhere else to go.

"Unlike Australia, we don't have any islands in Malaysia to park these immigrants. We are

very considerate about their plight and try to help them as much as possible," he said, adding immigrants who had landed in Thailand were told by authorities there to come here as "Malaysians are very kind people", drawing more laughter from the gallery.

"Our neighbours don't want to accept these people. We can't just throw them into the sea. This was my view when I was the prime minister. Even the present leader Datuk Seri Najib Razak is not complaining about illegal immigrants."

In a parting remark, Dr Mahathir said Sabah was much much more peaceful than The Philippines, adding that Malaysia could double its population if they wanted to because there were a "few million Chinese and Indians who would like to migrate here". – September 11, 2013.

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