

Let refugees work, UNHCR tells Malaysia
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By KC Nazari

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has urged Malaysia to enact a policy to deal with refugees in the country, including allowing them to hold jobs.

This would help Malaysia address other related concerns about crime and illegal labour, UNHCR representative in Malaysia Richard Towle said.

Towle made the call for a proper policy when asked about the steps that could be taken by Malaysia to improve its treatment of refugees who end up at its shores.

"We think that at the national level, it would be useful to enact a refugee policy and strategy that is developed by the government in close cooperation with us and another international organisation," he said in a recent interview with The Malaysian Insider following news that Malaysia would accept 3,000 Syrian refugees over the next three years.

Malaysia could also improve the lots of refugee here with changes to refugee laws in Malaysia, including considering giving them the right to work in the country.

Refugees in Malaysia are still considered as undocumented or illegal immigrants under current law, Towle said.

"It would be better for the government to regularise the legal status of refugees in Malaysia including giving them the right to work.

"This is because if people are not here illegally, they could get better income, look after themselves and not get exploited," he said.

He said that the government would also stand to gain with this move.

"In the same way it also serves the interest of the government because they know who is here, who is registered. It's a good idea to do this for a government that is concerned about illegal migrations and criminality.

"The other benefit is the employers are able to find workers for reasonable wages, lawful workers who will not be from the black markets. So that sort of formula would really be a win-win situation for everybody including refugees and the government," he told The Malaysian Insider.

For now, the Refugee Convention 1961 and the Protocol 1967 are legislation documents that define what are refugees, their rights and the responsibilities of signatory countries.

So far, 147 countries have signed the convention and 146 have signed the protocol. However, Malaysia has yet to sign the convention although it has opened its doors to refugees.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, in his speech at the UN General Assembly recently, gave his commitment to accept 3,000 Syrian refugees in the next three years.

"We hope that Malaysia, like other countries in the region, would consider signing the refugees convention because that provides a global multilateral system of operation.

"But even if Malaysia doesn't sign the convention, there are many things that Malaysia could still do to improve the condition of refugees here including letting them be here lawfully and letting them work," he said. – October 25, 2015.

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