

## **Malaysia To Decide On North Koreans In The Country - Ahmad Zahid**

KUALA LUMPUR, March 13 (Bernama) -- A decision will be announced today whether North Koreans with expired work permits will be repatriated or prohibited from leaving the country, said Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ahmad Zahid Hamidi.

He said there were 315 North Korean nationals in the country as of now.

"We (the government) make rational decisions and take rational actions. God willing, they will produce the best results, not only in terms of diplomatic relations but for humanitarian reasons as well," he said.

Ahmad Zahid, who is also Home Minister, spoke to reporters after attending the opening of a seminar on addressing child sexual crimes at the Putra World Trade Centre here.

He was asked to comment on the developments to ease the tension between Malaysia and North Korea in the wake of the murder of Kim Jong-nam, elder half-brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, in Malaysia on Feb 13.

The diplomatic row erupted after North Korean Ambassador to Malaysia Kang Chol made baseless allegations against Malaysia over the handling of the case, resulting in Malaysia declaring him persona non grata.

He left Kuala Lumpur on March 6. North Korea retaliated in the same manner against the Malaysian ambassador in Pyongyang.

On March 7, North Korea prohibited Malaysians in that country from leaving and Malaysia also took similar action in terms of the North Koreans in this country.

Ahmad Zahid said negotiations were going on between Malaysia and North Korea to ease the tension and find solutions.

He also said that the Malaysian government had yet to receive any official request from the next-of-kin to claim Jong-nam's body.

"If there is a claim, we will adopt several approaches and obtain confirmation from the Attorney-General's Chambers on the handling of the remains," he said.

Two foreign women - Siti Aisyah, 25, an Indonesian, and Vietnamese Doan Thi Huong, 29, were charged at the Sepang Magistrate's Court on March 1 with murdering Jong-nam.

Prior to this, Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Khalid Abu Bakar had confirmed that the victim was indeed Jong-Nam but declined to disclose the method used to make the confirmation.

Ahmad Zahid's statement today refuted allegations by North Korea's Permanent Representative to the United Nations (UN), Kim In-ryong, who is reported to have claimed that the individual killed in Malaysia was not Jong-nam.

Ahmad Zahid, who had earlier launched the 'KUL VIP Access' facility at the KL International Airport (KLIA) here, said Malaysia had no objection to the establishment of an independent international inquiry into Jong-nam's murder case.

"Any party, including North Korea or international bodies may establish any kind of inquiry or Board of Enquiry," he said.

On negotiations with Pyongyang, Ahmad Zahid said they had already begun on Monday.

"Yes (the negotiation process has begun) but we have not yet concluded matters," he said, adding that the meeting was between the secretaries-general of the respective foreign ministries.

Bilateral relations between Malaysia and North Korea have become strained following the murder of Jong-nam.

Tensions between Kuala Lumpur-Pyongyang arose after former North Korean ambassador to Malaysia Kang Chol made baseless accusations and insults against Malaysia on the handling of the murder case.

On March 7, Pyongyang prohibited Malaysians from leaving North Korea, while Malaysia reciprocated by barring North Koreans from leaving the country.

Asked whether he was optimistic that the situation could be resolved amicably, Ahmad Zahid said it depended "on the understanding from the other side".

"We are open hearted and open minded. We accept international diplomatic norms. I reckon many friendly countries respect the Vienna Convention which has been agreed upon internationally," he said.

On the nine Malaysians who are still stranded in North Korea, Ahmad Zahid said the government was still working hard to bring them home.

"We are very serious and thoroughly trying to get them out from Pyongyang...We are looking into all possibilities," he said.

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