

Gillard tells Najib asylum deal still on
The Malaysian Insider
Oktober 04 , 2011
By Shannon Teoh

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 4 — Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard has called Datuk Seri Najib Razak to assure him that her government remains committed to a refugee swap that has raised human rights concerns in both Pacific nations, an Australian newspaper reported today.

The Australian reported that Gillard made the call to her counterpart nearly two weeks ago as concerns grew that the strident tone of the debate over the asylum deal could affect bilateral relations which have been testy since Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was in power.

The call appears to be part of an effort by Australian politicians to pacify Putrajaya after Malaysia's human rights record came under heavy fire in the fierce clash over the country's suitability as a site for processing boatpeople arriving on the island's shores.

"The Malaysian agreement was discussed. Both countries remain committed to the agreement," the top-selling national newspaper quoted a spokesman for Gillard as saying yesterday.

The broadsheet said that "the main purpose of the phone call was to update Najib on the implications of the August 31 court ruling and restate the government's commitment to the arrangement."

The Australian High Court had struck down the deal which would have seen 800 asylum-seekers transferred to Malaysia in exchange for Australia resettling 4,000 declared refugees and picking up an estimated RM1 billion bill.

The call followed a sustained opposition attack on the suitability of the Malaysia deal. —
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Opposition foreign affairs spokeswoman Julie Bishop also called the Malaysian high commissioner in Canberra, Datuk Salman Ahmad, last month to reassure him about the importance of the relationship with Putrajaya.

The call followed a sustained opposition attack on the suitability of the Malaysia deal, which focused on the treatment of refugees by Malaysia, as the country is not a signatory to a United Nations convention on refugees.

The relationship between the two countries has only recently been on the mend and the asylum swap agreed to earlier this year has been hailed by both governments as a milestone in relations and also combating human trafficking.

Dr Mahathir had caused an uproar just weeks before stepping down as prime minister in October 2003 during an incident in which he called Australia a "US puppet" following then US president George W. Bush's description of Australia as its regional "sheriff" for its support in his "war on terror."

Gillard, who has been fending off speculation about the longevity of her leadership after the

court ruling, faces opposition over offshore processing at home as polls last month showed primary support for her Labour Party had sunk to a record low of 26 per cent.

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