

## **Aussie PM short of one vote to revive asylum deal**

**The Malaysian Insider**

**October 08, 2011**

**By Clara Chooi**

CANBERRA, Oct 8 — Despite Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard's recent assurance to Putrajaya of her commitment to push for the refugee swap deal, her Labour government is expected to be defeated by one vote in Parliament next week.

The Sydney Morning Herald (SMH) said one lawmaker, West Australian Nationals MP Tony Crook, currently stands in the way of the bill's smooth passage.

"Mr Crook, one of six crossbenchers in the House of Representatives, is critical to the vote on the bill. The government needs four votes to secure its passage but with Andrew Wilkie and Adam Bandt opposed, it has only three so far," SMH said today.

But Crook reportedly told the media that he was still "undecided" and frustrated that the major parties had failed to resolve the issue between them.

However, SMH pointed out that should Crook cave to pressure and support the bill, the proposed amendments to the Migration Act would never pass Parliament as the Greens and Coalition would likely block it in the Senate.

"But the government is eager for it to pass the lower house to avoid what would be its first legislative defeat since forming minority government and to apply pressure to Mr (Tony) Abbott (opposition leader)," it said.

Gillard (picture) reportedly placed a phone call to her Malaysian counterpart Datuk Seri Najib Razak several weeks back to assure him that her government remains committed to the refugee swap deal, which has raised human rights concerns in both nations.

The Australian reported last week that Gillard made the call following concerns that the strident tone of debate over the asylum seekers deal could affect bilateral relations, which have been testy since Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's tenure as Malaysia's prime minister.

Gillard's controversial refugee swap deal with Malaysia faced its first defeat on August 31 when the High Court declared it invalid as Canberra could not ensure protection for asylum seekers sent to Malaysia, which is not a signatory to the UN refugee convention.

Determined to press on, Gillard mooted amendments to Australia's Migration Act, which is scheduled to be voted on next week, but Opposition Leader Tony Abbott has already declared his refusal to support the deal, throwing forcing the prime minister's plans to go awry again.

The Migration Act amendments seek to circumvent the August 31 decision of the High Court and allow the Australian government the discretion to send asylum seekers to any offshore destination, which Abbot recently described as "offshore dumping".

Australia, a nation of about 23 million people, receives up to a few thousand asylum seekers by boat each year, stirring intense political debate over border security.

Under Gillard's original deal, informally called the "Malaysia Solution", Australia plans to send 800 asylum seekers to Malaysia where their refugee claims would be assessed in return for accepting 4,000 refugees from Malaysia.

The arrangement was designed to deter people smugglers who traffic people on leaky fishing boats on an often dangerous journey from Indonesia, as those arriving by boat would have no guarantee of eventually settling in Australia.

The SMH also said today should Gillard lost the vote next week, hers would be the first government in over 80 years to be defeated on a bill in the House.

The last such incident, the paper said, was when former conservative government led by Stanley Bruce was defeated by 35 votes to 34 on a maritime bill in September 1929.

Bruce had then called for a general election the following day and lost it, along with his seat, it added.

The Coalition (Gillard's opponents) is banking on the Migration Act amendments doubling as a de facto confidence motion in the Gillard government," the paper wrote.

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