

Hunting the illegals
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After months of delays and post-ponements, Malaysia's long-threatened crack-down on the country's hundreds of thousands of illegal aliens kicked off with more of a whimper than a bang. As an amnesty expired last week, 30,000 enforcement officers, along with a 300,000-strong volunteer militia, scoured the nation but initially failed to turn up more than a handful of potential violators. In one nighttime raid on a building site near the capital, 300 police and immigration officials roused sleeping workers from their dormitories and forced them to squat in rows on the ground. All proved to have documents, though half a dozen were detained for validity checks. "There is a possibility [the illegals] have gone into hiding because they knew of the crackdown," conceded a slightly sheepish senior official at the scene.

It would have been hard not to know about it, as the move has been chewed over at length since it was first mooted last October. The maneuver, an attempt to staunch the flood of illegals that critics blame for a rise in violent crime and other social ills, was delayed until the end of January and again until March 1 after last-minute negotiations with Indonesia, where most of the illegal workers are from. Anyone unlawful found in Malaysia can now be fined, imprisoned or even beaten.

Human-rights activists argue that such nationwide clean-outs some 400,000 workers were deported in 2002 are futile as many illegals go into hiding or slip back into the country after being expelled. The raids also miss the main culprits, the employers and recruiters who sneak workers into the country, says activist Aegile Fernandez a point government officials themselves concede. "We have produced 113 employers in court in the last two years, but they have never been convicted," sighs Ishak Mohamed, the Immigration Department's senior enforcement officer. "They have very good lawyers."

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