

Malaysia gives illegals the boot
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Malaysia's drive to rid itself of hundreds of thousands of illegal foreign workers has turned into an embarrassing and lethal disaster. In the last several days, 14 Filipinos and more than 50 Indonesians reportedly died in make-shift border camps thrown together by local authorities to house the hordes of displaced returnees. Most of the dead were children suffering from dehydration and disease.

This isn't the first time that the authorities in relatively prosperous Malaysia have conducted campaigns to eject illegal workers, who typically fill menial jobs in industries like construction. But the scale and severity of the current crackdown is unprecedented. Scores of illegal immigrants have been arrested; some have been sentenced to caning and lengthy prison terms. The harsh treatment has ignited a political and diplomatic firestorm. Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo phoned Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad to make a personal appeal for a moratorium on deportations of Filipinos. Amien Rais, speaker of the Indonesian Parliament, warned that Malaysia was "playing with fire" by mistreating foreign workers.

Malaysian authorities deny any maltreatment of deportees. And Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar reacted angrily to the burning of his country's flag by protesters in Manila. "Have they forgotten this is the place that their countrymen earn a living?" he asked. "Is this how they show their appreciation?" To many Indonesians and Filipinos, the fact that they can no longer earn their living in Malaysia is precisely the problem.

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