

Malaysia angry over Australian criticism
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By Michelle Grattan

Malaysia's High Commissioner to Australia has slammed the "widespread mis-characterisation" of his country by some federal MPs in the debate over the Gillard government's people-swap plan.

In a letter to parliamentarians, Salman Ahmad has said that the debate "does not reflect Malaysia's track record on the issue of asylum seekers and refugees".

"We see it as unfair that this democratic debate has been undertaken at the expense of Malaysia's good reputation and its solid values," Mr Ahmad wrote.

The High Commissioner of Malaysia, Salman Ahmad. *Photo: Alex Ellinghausen / Fairfax*

"I am very concerned with the sustained negative portrayal of my country in the Parliament, which has extended to the media and the general public.

"While it is truly understandable that all sides of the Parliament want to employ the most effective policy for the country to protect its borders against illegal arrivals, its action in bringing down and tarnishing the good name of another country is uncalled for," he wrote.

Mr Ahmad said Malaysia had entered into the arrangement for the people swap with the sincere intention of combating "the heinous crimes" of people smuggling and trafficking. This was consistent with agreed regional processes.

The arrangement was also decided after extensive consultations with the United Nations High Commissioner For Refugees and the International Organisation for Migration. These organisations would be vigorously involved in providing necessary support and operational assistance in implementing the arrangement.

The Malaysian people swap - under which Australia would send 800 asylum seekers to Malaysia and in return take in several thousand refugees - is the government's desired policy to deter boat arrivals. It was struck down by the High Court, and the government has not been able to win sufficient parliamentary numbers to get it through.

The Coalition has strongly condemned the Malaysia deal on the grounds that people's human rights would not be protected, pointing to Malaysia's refusal to sign the refugee convention.

Mr Ahmad said Malaysia's co-operation with the UNHCR in resettling refugees to a third country went back a long way. He pointed to its record in handling Vietnamese boat people as "a clear testimony of our sincere commitments to solving the refugee problem". He said it spoke volumes for Malaysia's efforts in providing assistance on humanitarian grounds on a case-by-case basis.

"Today, there are more than 99,000 people of concern, which the UNHRC categorises refugees and asylum seekers, in Malaysia. In addition, Malaysia has to deal with about 1,303,126 illegal foreign workers."

Malaysia advocated a regional solution in tackling people-smuggling issues, he said. The fact that his country had not signed the refugee convention should not be viewed as a deterrent to "the forging of an innovative and strategic regional partnership with the aim to effectively address these crimes".

Mr Ahmad wrote that Malaysia highly valued its long standing and its historical and bilateral relationship with Australia.

"Both our countries have a broad-ranging relationship which stretches over five decades as partners in trade, investment, education, defence, agriculture, and have strong people-to-people links.

"However, we feel that the political rhetoric and the negative portrayal of Malaysia will undermine the positive aspects of our relationship and diminishes the good work we have achieved thus far in our collective efforts to combat this undignified and illegitimate industry."

Victorian Labor MP Michael Danby said no one had been a stronger critic of human rights in Malaysia than he had, but the High Commissioner was correct in responding to the attack on his country.

Mr Danby said the Liberals were willing to jeopardise Australia's good relations with its neighbours in order to enjoy "the political benefit of blocking a deal that might ease the boat people/asylum seeker problem".

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