

# Thousands of fleeing Indonesian workers detained

26 March 1998

The Malaysian and Singapore governments are intensifying their persecution of impoverished workers fleeing from Indonesia in search of work. Growing numbers of workers and their families are risking their lives to escape from Indonesia, where at least 8.5 million are now unemployed.

In Malaysia, groups of immigrant workers are rounded up daily. Police mount raids on coastal villages and set up roadblocks inland. Every night marine police and coast guard personnel chase motor boats and trawlers to prevent landings on the country's 2,000 kilometre coastline, particularly along the Melaka Straits, facing Indonesia.

Between February 9 and March 1, Malaysian authorities tracked 332 boat landings and detained 3,971 immigrants. So far this year, 17,000 Indonesian workers have been bundled off to detention centres and deported. By early March, Malaysia's 10 detention centres held 11,000 prisoners and were stretched to the bursting point.

A typical mass arrest followed the setting up of a roadblock at Kampung Merotai in Sabah on March 16. Authorities were informed in advance of a large group of people being transported from the township of Tawau. In the early hours of the morning, 92 Indonesians—39 men, 34 women and 19 children—were detained when six minibuses were halted. Later that night, 7 more men and 11 women were detained in a boat at the Tawau jetty.

Police have been authorised to use the Internal Security Act against any Malaysian found assisting or harbouring overseas workers. This legislation enables officials to detain, without trial, anyone regarded as a threat to national security.

Malaysian authorities are trying to depict their detention centres as rest homes or holiday camps. Deputy director of internal security and public order,

Jusuf Mohamed Said, claimed arrested workers said, "it was better to eat rice in our jails, than survive on sweet potatoes or tapioca back in their villages."

The reality is that the Malaysian regime has carried out a relentless campaign for years against workers who have arrived in the country without documents, treating them as criminals and herding them into what are nothing but concentration camps.

Far from having a holiday, inmates have been subjected to beatings and systematic abuse, and denied medical treatment, causing deaths from easily preventable diseases. Migrant workers are beaten or forced to stand in the sun for hours if they ask for water. Women are sexually abused.

These conditions will only worsen. Malaysian Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abfullah Ahmad Badawi declared last week that anti-immigrant operations would be stepped up. "Charity must start at home," he announced. He called on Indonesia to use its naval ships to help remove the immigrants.

In neighbouring Singapore, the Police Coast Guard has intercepted about 20 vessels, arresting more than 100 immigrants over the past six weeks. Once caught, workers face up to six months in jail and can be caned three times before being deported.

A virtual state of siege exists in nearby coastal areas of Indonesia. Police, navy, port and customs authorities are stepping up their efforts to halt the tide of refugees. Naval patrols are conducted four times a day. Intelligence agents are deployed in at least six "launching sites" on the island of Batam, used by smugglers to ferry Indonesians across the straits to Malaysia or Singapore.

According to Singapore's *Straits Times*, 20 syndicates are involved in a human trade across the waters, charging each refugee some 800,000 rupiah (US\$100), or about three months' wages. On one

recent weekend, more than 200 Indonesian men waited for boats in Batam and Bintan. Aged between 18 and 40, they came from as far away as Medan, in northern Sumatra, and Bali, near Australia.

They are put up in safe houses or in dormitories patrolled by uniformed guards until a syndicate leader gives the go-ahead for the run to proceed. At sea, 10 to 15 workers are packed tightly in a 7-metre-long sampan, fitted with an outboard motor, usually of about 200 horsepower. Local papers have reported several cases of overcrowded boats sinking.

The police raids, mass arrests, incarcerations and forcible deportations are directed against thousands of workers whose only crime is to want a better life for themselves and their families. The various bourgeois nationalist regimes make them scapegoats for the social and economic crisis produced by the capitalist market. They are victims of the outmoded nation-state system, which divides the working class along national lines.



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