Malaysian government cracks down on immigrant workers

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Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's government last month stepped up its campaign to expel tens of thousands of immigrant workers from Malaysia. On January 24, Assistant Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi announced what he termed a "temporary halt" on the recruitment of Indonesian workers by Malaysian businesses.

Another Assistant Deputy Prime Minister, International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Rafidah Aziz, announced that authorities would begin meetings with employers from factories, plantations and construction companies to "ask them to immediately prepare themselves not to be dependent on the foreign workers".

Government leaders seized on a clash between police and 400 Indonesian textile workers employed at the Hualong Corporation in the western state of Negri Sembilan on January 17 as a pretext to impose the ban. New legislation was foreshadowed increasing police powers "to mete out quick punishment" to guest workers involved in "crime".

The confrontation in Negri Sembilan erupted when the Hualong employees protested against the heavy-handed tactics used by police in detaining 16 workers, allegedly for "drug abuse". During the ensuing melee, 147 workers were arrested. Of these, 80 have been deported and the remainder are facing charges ranging from rioting, punishable by up to two years in jail, to taking part in an illegal assembly, which carries a six-month jail term. All 400 workers had their work permits revoked. Those deported were herded into trucks under the supervision of about 20 police, including heavily armed officers from the special General Operations Force.

Government and media outlets immediately blamed the workers for the incident and launched a vitriolic attack on Indonesian guest workers in general, branding them as "troublemakers". Mahathir defended the decision to impose the employment ban. "A lot of crimes they (Indonesian workers) have committed, we've kept silent about," he claimed. "But when a riot is carried out by one group, followed by another and another, we cannot any longer stay silent."

However, the clash in Negri Sembilan has all the hallmarks of being deliberately provoked by the authorities. Malaysian workers' rights group Tenganita, which investigated the incident, blamed the police who lined up workers and repeatedly hit them while conducting urine tests. Tenganita director Irene Fernandez said: "The workers reacted and the police began to use force and continued to beat up the workers. That was the last straw; the seam burst and the rioting began." This assessment was supported by Indonesian labour rights group Kopbumi, which said its investigation showed that the incident was provoked by the police aggression.

Other so-called riots cited by Mahathir are hardly worthy of the title—such as a ruckus between about 70 Indonesian workers and stall owners on January 20 in Cyberjaya, south of Kuala Lumpur—or were the direct outcome of the government's own repressive anti-immigrant measures. Last November, for example, 2,000 mainly Indonesian immigrants, who were facing deportation, staged a protest in a detention centre in Pekan Nenes, Jahor.

Late last year the government suddenly changed the official status of thousands of legal guest workers to "illegal" by replacing six-year permits with three-year permits. Workers who had been in the country for three years, most of them working in low-paid jobs on plantations, in manufacturing and construction, were given just three months to leave Malaysia.

The government exploited the disturbance at the Jahor detention centre to impose brutal measures against "illegals" including the flogging of first time offenders. Immigration Department Director Datuk Mohd Jamal Kamdi said amendments to the Immigration Act to allow

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police to beat "offenders" with a rattan cane would be in place by March. "We have been soft for too long," he said.

These measures are part of a broader assault on immigrant workers. Authorities in Selangor, Malaysia's most industrialised state, have directed enforcement agencies to tear down immigrant workers' squatter housing. "We have identified two Indonesian colonies and we will be demolishing the houses next week," Ampang Jaya Municipal Council president Ahmad Kabit said.

Authorities in all centres have instigated stringent checks on street stall vendors to seek out overseas workers. Trader and driver permits can be issued only to Malaysians. Hundreds of marine police have been mobilised to carry out increased surveillance on entry points along the waters between Malaysia and Indonesia.

Mahathir's government is preparing a campaign involving the police, immigration officials and the military to round up and deport 30,000 Indonesian labourers from the eastern state of Sabah and another 10,000 from neighbouring Sarawak, on the island of Borneo. These workers have been declared "illegals," with the government claiming that they have overstayed their work permits.

The Immigration Department announced last month that Malaysia had deported 124,000 "illegal" workers so far this financial year, "up from 103,000 last year". "Our target is 150,000," director Kamdi boasted, while Home Ministry Secretary-General Aseh Che Mat said Kuala Lumpur's aim was to "halve the number of Indonesian workers in the country".

The mounting offensive on the rights of immigrant workers has nothing to do with supposed "criminal activity". The government hopes to divert discontentment over the growing level of unemployment and falling living standards by fueling anti-immigrant sentiment.

Late last year, the government was forced to revise downwards its economic growth forecast for a second time from 2.0 to 1.0 percent, citing the "greater than expected" slowdown in the world economy. According to figures released by the Human Resources department in November, electronic and electrical components manufacturers across the country retrenched 37,000 workers last year. Electrical and electronic goods comprise over 60 percent of Malaysia's exports. With almost 21 percent of all exported goods going to America, Malaysia is highly vulnerable to the US economic slowdown.

Layoffs are still growing, with a total of 2,482 workers sacked from 104 companies in the first 19 days of this year. Human Resources Minister Fong Chan said: "More than 2,000 workers were retrenched due to a drop in the demand for goods, while the closure of companies and management reorganisation were other major reasons."

In addition, many Malaysian workers are returning home after being retrenched in neighbouring Singapore, which is also heavily affected by the US-led recession. Even the poor, low-paid jobs occupied by immigrant workers are now coveted.

This is not the first time that Mahathir has attempted to make scapegoats of immigrant workers to divert attention from his government's failings. In 1997 the economic collapse that swept through Asia shattered his grandiose scheme to transform Malaysia into a modern industrial hi-tech economy.

The estimated two million legal and "illegal" guest workers brought into the country in the 1980s and 1990s to provide cheap labour for Malaysia's manufacturing export industries were no longer needed and rapidly became the target of anti-immigrant and chauvinist attacks by the regime.

The latest decision by Malaysia to expel Indonesian guest workers has also created a crisis in Indonesian ruling circles, prompting both apologies and criticism from the Jakarta government. Indonesia earns more than $500 million annually from the remittances of millions of overseas workers.

The Indonesian government, like its Malaysian counterpart, also has deeper concerns. It is anxious about the political ramifications of tens of thousands of guest workers returning home to swell the ranks of the unemployed in Indonesia, already predicted to increase this year to 40 million, up from around 36 million in 2001.

Bomer Pasaribu, the director of the Center for Labor and Development Studies and a former Indonesian manpower minister, warned this week: "We are already facing a super-unemployment crisis and this will only add to the pressure that may lead to the explosion of a social time bomb at home."

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