

Workers deported from Malaysia continue to perish in border camps

Noel Holt
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More than one month since the Malaysian government suspended its campaign to deport tens of thousands of workers from neighbouring countries, at least 10,000 still languish in shocking conditions in Malaysian and Indonesian holding camps. This week, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad agreed to a Philippines government request to open up the Malaysian transit camps to inspection. He warned, however, that while the deportations had been temporarily halted, the arrest and detention of immigrant workers would continue.

Since protests and criticism at home and abroad forced Mahathir's government to suspend its brutal deportation operation, coverage of the continuing plight of those expelled has all but disappeared from the pages of the popular media. A spokesman for the Consortium for Indonesian Migrant Workers Defence said this week that fewer media reports on the issue had "given the impression the humanitarian crisis was over".

In a camp near the Indonesian town of Nunukan, across the border from the Malaysian Borneo province of Sabah, workers who had fled there are still waiting in the vain hope of obtaining work permits allowing them to return to Malaysia. Kopbumi reported that had 76 people died in the camp because of the squalid conditions. Even so, the Indonesian government has withdrawn a hospital ship it earlier dispatched when the situation facing the deportees became a public issue.

Earlier this year, an estimated 600,000 of the 1.5 million foreign workers in Malaysia were deemed to be illegal and given a July 31 deadline to leave the country. Many had been reduced to illegal status late last year when the government suddenly abolished six-year work permits and replaced them with three-year permits.

According to Malaysian government estimates, some 400,000 migrant workers had already fled the country under threat of severe penalties, including lengthy jail sentences, heavy fines and caning with a rotan, a long bamboo rod capable of inflicting permanent injuries and disfigurement. The government launched a military-style operation to round up the remainder, with a target of "zero illegal immigrants" by 2003.

An estimated 80 percent of the construction industry workforce had come from Indonesia, half of whom have been deemed illegal. Many migrant workers had also been employed

in manufacturing, plantations and as domestic servants.

Foreign workers and their families are now suffering hellish conditions, after being detained in camps to await deportation. Many are unable to leave because of lack of funds to buy a passage home and because their national governments have provided little or no assistance.

Employers in industries such as construction have made the situation worse. Unable to find replacement labour, they attempted to delay workers leaving by withholding the payment of wages until the last minute. This created a sudden exodus and massively increased the number of people in the already overcrowded camps. In many cases, wages were never paid, adding to the desperate plight of the displaced workers.

Doctors and welfare groups say conditions in the camps along the country's coast and in the Borneo border areas, including the lack of sanitation and clean water, have produced thousands of cases of dysentery and diarrhea.

There were earlier reports that 50 Indonesian workers had died in the camps, while three Filipino children perished during the deportation process. When 791 deportees arrived home to the Philippines aboard naval vessels on September 21 many children were suffering from bronchopneumonia and other respiratory infections. Altogether, 28,000 Filipinos have been deported since the beginning of August.

Unable to pay for fares home or sustain themselves, families have turned to desperate measures. The Indonesian newspaper *Kompas* and the Singapore *Straits Times* have reported incidents of parents selling children. *Kompas* revealed that a three-year-old boy was sold for \$US113 to buy a passage to Java and the *Straits Times* reported that at least three other infants were sold, for as little as \$US34.

The campaign against migrant workers has been particularly vicious in Sabah, where nearly 4,000 government officers, including military, police, Department of Immigration and local government officials were mobilised in Operation "Ops Nyan I" in a bid to remove an estimated 200,000 "illegal" immigrants. Roadblocks were established around towns, then bulldozers and other heavy equipment were sent into squatter settlements to destroy homes. Residents were rounded up and so-called "illegals" taken into custody. Dogs were used to flush out those hiding or trying to escape overland.

Operation “Ops Nyan I” angered local Malaysian workers and even local officials. Malaysian workers have been living alongside immigrants in the settlements for up to 30 years. The Sabah provincial government has also used the operation to remove local squatters from prime real estate close to cities and major towns. It has made no arrangements to relocate the local families, who have been left destitute, picking through the rubble of their homes.

The treatment meted out to migrant workers and their families caused outrage among working people in Indonesia and the Philippines. On August 26, demonstrators took to the streets in Indonesia’s capital Jakarta. After burning a Malaysian flag, the protestors smashed through the main gate of the Malaysian embassy.

In the Philippines capital Manila, protestors besieged the Malaysian embassy. Riot police were called after demonstrators clashed with embassy security guards and personnel. The demonstration was triggered by television footage of refugee centres in Sabah, showing a Filipino woman weeping over the body of her dead child.

Fearing a political backlash over their refusal to defend their citizens, the Manila and Jakarta regimes then registered official protests with Kuala Lumpur. Calls erupted in the Indonesian parliament for the withdrawal of all Indonesian workers to “teach Malaysia” a lesson. Peoples Consultative Assembly Speaker Amien Rais warned that Malaysia’s actions would “provoke a reaction from us”. Philippines President Gloria Arroyo asked former president Fidel Ramos to meet urgently with Mahathir to appeal for a more orderly deportation process from Sabah.

Faced with growing economic problems and political tensions in their own countries, both governments fear that the sudden influx of thousands of people—for whom they have made little or no provision—will produce social unrest. Both are also concerned about the impact of the loss of repatriated funds from overseas workers. Official figures from the Philippines show that 10 percent of its 76.5 million people are working abroad in 162 countries and last year sent home \$US6.2 billion. The sum represents 8.2 percent of the Philippines gross national product.

The Malaysian government launched the persecution of migrant workers in an attempt to divert attention from deteriorating economic and social conditions, including rising levels of unemployment, for which it has no answer. Mahathir set about blaming so-called “illegals” for upturns in industrial unrest, increased crime and social problems.

Following the Asian financial meltdown of 1997-1998, Mahathir refused to fully implement the restructuring measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and claimed that his defiance saved Malaysia from the economic chaos that hit other members of the Association of South East Asian Nations.

A temporary upturn in the Malaysian economy boosted

Mahathir’s campaign against the pro-IMF reform wing inside the ruling United Malays National Organisation led by Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who was expelled and framed-up on serious criminal charges.

In reality, only the continued demand in the US for Malaysian goods, particularly electronic and electrical goods, which account for 60 percent of the country’s exports, enabled Malaysia to recover from a 7.4 percent decline in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 1998 to a growth rate of 8.5 percent in 2001.

The deteriorating situation in the US and Japanese economies has now seen Malaysia’s growth rate plummet again to 3.8 percent, sending unemployment up to an official level of 3.7 percent.

There are signs of further trouble ahead. China’s entry into the World Trade Organisation has opened up new areas of cheaper labour, which are attracting international corporations. The Japanese electronic giant NEC has announced plans to close its plants in Malaysia and transfer production to Taiwan and China. The European telecommunications firm Ericsson intends to cut 20,000 jobs from its Malaysian operations.

Foreign workers and their families are still being accused of using facilities that should go to Malaysian nationals. In the Sabah State Legislature, legislator Maximus Onkili declared: “Recently we were informed that some 17,580 children of these refugees are taking the place of our children in schools. We now have to compete with them in getting and using public amenities, hospitals.”

The truth is that, even though foreign workers have been vital to the Malaysian economy—generating huge profits for Malaysian employers and international investors—the government has failed to provide them with any decent social conditions. Having exploited immigrant workers to provide the sweated labour needed to fuel growth in the years of economic expansion, the Mahathir regime has not hesitated to unleash a vicious campaign against the very same workers.



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