



UNHCR's role comes under fire

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KUALA LUMPUR: Government agencies going after illegal immigrants are sometimes at loggerheads with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees office here, and the Home Affairs Ministry has brought the matter before the Cabinet. Minister Datuk Seri Radzi Sheikh Ahmad is finding that agencies under the ministry, such as Rela and the Immigration Department faced difficulties exercising their duties.

"I have spoken to the Cabinet about UNHCR because they really get in our way. Even though we do not recognise refugees, we are a UN member country and accept them on humanitarian grounds," he said.

Radzi, who raised the issue at the Cabinet meeting on Wednesday, is now preparing a working paper requesting guidance.

He was asked to comment on 176 Myanmar nationals who were picked up during an operation by Rela and the Sepang Municipal Council's enforcement unit at an abandoned orchard in Sungai Merab, Dengkil, after the owner lodged a complaint and his plight was highlighted by TV3.

The 176 claimed they were refugees under the protection of the UNHCR.

A check by Berita Harian and TV3 earlier this week found more than 50 squatter houses, a coffee-shop, a tent for religious ceremonies, a volleyball court and a sepak takraw court in the orchard.

"Malaysia, like other United Nations member countries, accepts UNHCR's presence but not their powers," he told reporters yesterday.

Malaysia, he said, was not a signatory to any agreement concerning refugees "which means that we do not recognise UNHCR refugees".

"Even if the UNHCR says (most) are under their care, how can we let them all go?"

"They (the Myanmar nationals) are still being detained and we are conducting our investigations," said Radzi.

Earlier, Radzi, in his capacity as Umno secretary-general, presented RM100,000 worth of aid from the party to Information Minister Datuk Seri Zainuddin Maidin, who is also deputy chairman of the Aid Management and Disaster Committee, for flood victims at

Angkasapuri.

Zainuddin said he had received reports that the Chinese community in Johor had complained that they had not received aid.

"We heard complaints that help had not reached areas where there are mainly Chinese but we will go (to these places) and similar aid will be given to them," he said.

As at Jan 20, the government's National Disaster Relief Trust Fund had collected RM7.9 million, while the NSTP Flood Victims Assistance Fund stood at RM8.12 million.

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