

Human security must come first

FOREIGN LABOUR: It's essential that we value the work they do here

MALAYSIA-INDONESIAN ties seem to be strained yet again, as negotiations over the terms of employment for Indonesian maids coming to Malaysia remain unresolved. The issue now portends to become a bugbear that will disrupt relations between the two countries, despite the long historical and cultural bonds between both Malaysia and Indonesia. Worsening matters still is the fact that in recent times, there have emerged several radical nationalist groups in Indonesia that have applied more pressure upon President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who has been accused of being "too soft" with Malaysia. In the lead-up to the presidential election of 2014, we should expect to see even more expressions of anti-Malaysian sentiments beyond our shores.



Farish A. Noor is senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore

The maids issue, therefore, could not have come at a worse time for both governments, yet it is vital that cool heads are maintained at present. As I have written time and again in these pages, Malaysians need to understand that despite the flaring tempers of some Indonesians, it does not mean that Indonesians as a nation are overwhelmingly against Malaysia. It is important to note that despite the rhetoric we hear occasionally, not a single Malaysian tourist or student has been harmed there.

But Indonesia's perception of Malaysia is also shaped by the stories they hear about Malaysia, and often these stories are related by returning Indonesian workers who may have stories both pleasant and unpleasant to tell. This is something that we need to remember constantly: that every foreign worker who comes to Malaysia is also an accidental ambassador of his or her country; but upon their return, they also become accidental ambassadors of Malaysia. If their experience in Malaysia is a good one, it naturally follows that their accounts of Malaysia will be glowing as well.

As an academic who has lived, worked and researched in many



A foreign worker engaged in biometric registration. Every foreign worker who comes to Malaysia is also an **accidental ambassador** of his or her country.

parts of Indonesia over the past 10 years, I can testify to Malaysia's contribution to the betterment of Indonesian society. In the villages and small towns I have visited, I often noticed the familiar signs of prosperity brought home by Indonesian workers who have worked in Malaysia: their homes are better built, satellite dishes grace their roofs, their motorcycles and cars are of better quality.

These newfound symbols of wealth would not have been possible had it not been for their earnings in Malaysia next door, and the same goes for those workers re-

turning from the Gulf or other richer countries. Note that the salary of some of these foreign maids and workers may equal that of a junior university lecturer in Indonesia, and that only tells us why such jobs are sought after by so many. Yet, Malaysia's media has been lax in failing to highlight the role Malaysia has played in the development of Indonesia's rural communities, though I cannot fathom why.

But it cannot be denied that the otherwise positive image of Malaysia has also been besmirched by acts of ill-treatment that have

instead hogged the headlines in Indonesia, and which have provided grist to the mill of those who wish to damage Malaysia's image at home and internationally. The failure to persecute those who abuse foreign workers will only do Malaysia more harm in the long-run, and we ignore the consequences at our peril.

We need to ask, therefore, whether in a situation like this, the human security of workers as well as the host community should come first. The conventional understanding of security in our region has been that of the realist model, assuming that the state has to be protected from external threats that include invasions, infiltration by insurgents, acts of sabotage, etc.

Yet, adopting a human security approach can add nuance and widen the scope of our concerns further, while taking the needs of communities into account as well. A human security approach might begin by restoring value to the work that many of our foreign workers do, and to recognise that honest, hard work in factories, plantations and even at home constitutes labour that is beneficial to society.

This adds two things to the equation. Firstly it entails valuing the work done by cheap foreign labour and recognising that this is worthy

→ Turn to Page 21

Learn to live without cheap foreign labour

→ From Page 19

labour, that is essential for the country's development. Secondly, it might also persuade Malaysians that doing such work — which includes domestic work — is actually worthy of them, too.

For too long, some Malaysians have regarded the jobs done by foreign workers as lowly; and this prejudice was often felt by foreign workers themselves who then communicate these sentiments to their fellow citizens when they return. But honest hard work in any indus-

try — including the home — is laudable, and ought to be valourised instead. Malaysia's success in the 1980s led to the creation of a new middle class *ex nihilo* (almost out of nothing). But in our race for development we cannot forget that societies only develop when all citizens play their part in the economic chain.

Thus Indonesia's threat to stop sending domestic workers to Malaysia may not be a bad thing after all. For from the perspective of human or societal security, we also need to ask: how secure and safe is a

country that is so dependent on foreign workers to do everything? What sort of human security are we talking about when many of Malaysia's key strategic sites — such as airports, naval complexes and military bases — are built by non-Malaysians? Would this happen in any other country, for that matter?

As Southeast Asia races on towards development, the economies of countries like Indonesia will grow, and the time will come when they will no longer need to rely on the remittances of workers from abroad. Malaysia's economy in turn will

have to adjust to these new realities as well; as will Malaysians who have to learn to live without workers at low cost — a point made by Human Resources Minister Datuk Seri Dr S. Subramaniam this week.

Such an adjustment may be difficult to stomach at first. But in the long run, Malaysians learning to be self-sufficient is surely not a bad thing. And as far as protecting the human security of both foreign workers and the host community is concerned, wouldn't less dependency on foreign cheap labour be a good thing for both?