

**AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL
PRESS RELEASE**

AI Index: PRE 01/289/2010
19 August 2010

Malaysia should halt expansion of security force accused of abuses

The Malaysian government should scrap plans to expand a state-sponsored security force of civilian volunteers with a long record of human rights abuses against refugees and migrants, Amnesty International said on Thursday.

Ikatan Relawan Rakyat, commonly known as RELA, aims to expand its membership from 1.6 million to 2.6 million by the end of the year, according to an interview given to the Associated Press by the organization's Director-General Zaidon Asmuni. However, Asmuni also said RELA would be unable to thoroughly train more than 8,000 new officers per year.

Amnesty International documented in two reports in 2010 how RELA volunteers regularly engage in physical abuse and extortion, and indiscriminately detained those with the legal right to be in the country.

"RELA agents are responsible for the most rampant human rights abuses against migrants and refugees in Malaysia," said Sam Zarifi, Asia-Pacific Director at Amnesty International.

"Instead of curbing their abuses, the government plans to let loose a million more ill-trained civilians with police powers."

RELA is a civilian volunteer corps, but the government authorizes it to exercise police functions, including raiding, interrogating and detaining suspected illegal immigrants. Some RELA members are authorized to carry firearms.

RELA's Director-General stated that new recruits will again be involved in the guarding of immigration detention centres, which has not been carried out on a large scale since mid-2009.

"Last year the Malaysian government promised Amnesty International that RELA would be stripped of its highly-criticized role in immigration enforcement, so it is very disappointing to see the force being handed back powers over immigration detention centres," said Sam Zarifi.

Amnesty International has found that RELA lacks a clear structure of command responsibility, allowing RELA members to commit abuses without being held accountable.

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