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Malaysia: Deaths raise questions over repatriation process

The deaths of eight Indonesians in a repatriation operation in the early hours of this morning raise serious questions about the process, Amnesty International declared today.

The disturbance erupted as Malaysian police officers, reportedly armed with batons, water cannon and tear gas, prepared to forcibly repatriate hundreds of Indonesians from Aceh province from four detention camps around the country.

“Genuine asylum-seekers from Aceh may be placed at risk as the Malaysian Government attempts to address the problem of economic migrants. Some Acehnese may be at risk of torture, “disappearance” or being killed by security forces if returned to Indonesia,” the organization said.

“The Malaysian authorities should stop the current spate of repatriations until they can guarantee that all Acehnese seeking asylum have full access to a fair and satisfactory procedure to determine their refugee status.”

Incommunicado detention, torture, extrajudicial executions and “disappearances” continue to be reported in the Indonesian province of Aceh. Human rights monitors are denied access to the area.

According to one news report, police spokesman Ghazali Mohamed Amin said that the operation was targeted at the Acehnese in particular *“because they have been here for too long”*. Reports, as yet unconfirmed, indicate that boats carrying 1,500 Indonesians left Malaysia for Indonesia today. Amnesty International is particularly concerned by comments by Malaysian police that four Indonesians injured in the uprising died while being deported.

“The deaths of at least eight people in this operation raise grave questions about the level of force used by the Malaysian authorities,” Amnesty International asserted. “There should be an full investigation into the deaths and independent monitors should be allowed access to the camps.”

An unknown number of the detainees are also believed to have been injured but the authorities have not yet released any figures. It is not clear where the remaining detainees have been taken. According to the police, one police officer died and 38 officers were injured during the incident.

Background

In recent months the Malaysian authorities have stepped up operations to stem the tide of economic migrants from neighbouring Indonesia, fleeing escalating unemployment, food shortages, rising prices and social unrest. According to press reports, about 17,000 alleged illegal immigrants, the majority from Indonesia, are currently held at heavily overcrowded detention camps throughout Malaysia. More than 6,000 are believed to have been deported in March and last week the Malaysian authorities announced plans to deport a further 10,000.

Amnesty International is concerned at the lack of access for domestic and international human rights monitors to the camps, particularly in the light of continuing reports of denial of prompt and adequate medical care and unsatisfactory food supplies. Up to 400 alleged illegal immigrants held at Lenggeng detention camp in the state of Negeri Sembilan are reported to have rioted about 10 days ago after water supplies were cut off. Asylum-seekers are also being denied full access to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR).
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