

Malaysia to demolish memorial built by Vietnamese boat people: report

ATTENTION - ADDS appeal from diaspora group ///

KUALA LUMPUR, June 30 (AFP) - Malaysia is to demolish a memorial built by former Vietnamese boat people on a northern island where they were interned in the 1970s, reports said Thursday.

Officials in northern Terengganu state said the construction had never been approved and was to be destroyed on the orders of the Foreign Ministry, acting in response to a complaint from the Vietnamese government.

"We have to take into account the relationship between the Malaysian and Vietnamese governments on the issue," state secretary Muhatar Abdullah told the official Bernama news agency.

The monument on Bidong island, which was built in March, speaks of the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese people who perished as they fled their homeland.

Bidong is among several places in Asia that bore the brunt of the exodus of Vietnamese asylum-seekers after the end of the Vietnam War in April 1975 and, later, "economic" refugees who followed in the 1980s and 90s. Some 245,133 Vietnamese boat people passed through Bidong between 1978 and 1990, Bernama said.

The decision to demolish the memorial has triggered angry opposition from the Vietnamese diaspora and appeals to the Malaysian government to reconsider.

Earlier this month, Paris-based Vietnam Committee for Human Rights urged Kuala Lumpur not to tear down the memorial.

"This is not a political memorial," said Vo Van Ai, president of the Committee and a prominent opponent of the communist regime in Hanoi. "It is an expression of thanks by former boat people to... all those who gave them refuge in their hour of need."

At the climax of the boat people's exodus in 1979, some 55 people arrived every hour on the Malaysian shores, Ai said. "The monument is part of the Vietnamese people's memory. What happened in our history must be recorded and Vietnam must come to terms with this."

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