

**Global Detention Project Submission to the UN Committee on the Elimination of
Discrimination against Women**

Pre-sessional Working Group for the 69th session (24-28 July 2017)

Malaysia

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Issues related to immigration detention

The Global Detention Project (GDP) welcomes the opportunity to provide information relevant to the Consideration of the combined third to fifth periodic report of Malaysia (due in 2012 and received by the United Nations on 17 October 2016), with respect to the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

The GDP is an independent research centre based in Geneva that investigates immigration-related detention. As per the GDP's mandate, this submission focuses on the State party's laws and practices concerning detention for immigration-related reasons. This submission is based on GDP research as well as research findings from GDP partners, other stakeholders and official Malaysian institutions.

I. Immigration detention context

Malaysia is a magnet for migrants and asylum seekers despite its poor human rights record and failure to ratify pivotal human rights treaties including the two International Covenants (on civil and political rights and economic, social and cultural rights) and the Convention against Torture. Illegal entry and stay is criminalized and migrants often serve prison sentences before being transferred to one of 13 to 17 dedicated immigration centres dubbed "immigration depots" while awaiting deportation. According to statistics from the Malaysian government's Enforcement Agency Integrity Commission (EAIC) 86,795 persons were placed in immigration detention in 2016, mainly from South East Asia. Although the government does not produce disaggregated gender-related data numerous women are likely to be in immigration detention as they represent 44.2% of migrants and refugees in Malaysia.¹ There are many reports that documented and undocumented women migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are unprotected and vulnerable to abuse.²

¹ Population Division, "International Migration 2015," Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/wallchart/docs/MigrationWallChart2015.pdf>.

² Steven Sim, "IWD 2017: Women migrant workers in Malaysia," 8 March 2017, <https://stevensim.com/2017/03/08/iwd-2017-woman-migrant-workers-in-malaysia/>
www.globaldetentionproject.org

According to UNHCR 5,648 asylum-seekers and 2,282 refugees were detained in 2015 and faced prosecution for immigration-related purpose.³ Malaysia is not a signatory to the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and asylum-seekers and refugees are not protected against arbitrary detention. There are also reports that potential trafficking victims may be charged with immigration offences and detained in the criminal justice system due the lack of formal victims identification procedures.⁴

Legal Framework

Section 34(1) of the Immigration Act provides that persons may be detained for “such period as may be necessary” pending removal. On average immigration detainees spend between two months to two years in detention.

Procedural standards are very poor; immigration detainees are rarely informed of the reasons for detention in a language they understand; and detainees have scant access to legal counsel. There are no alternatives to immigration detention. Some UNHCR refugee card holders detained in immigration depots can be released subject to the government’s discretion but the UN refugee agency only has access to them after they are transferred to the depots from prisons where they first serve immigration related sentences. According to UNHCR refugees can be in detention for years while waiting to be able to access the UN refugee agency and the average detention period for refugees is 16 months.⁵

Under Regulation 11 of the Immigration Regulations 2003 (Administration and Management of Immigration Depots), children under the age of 12 may remain with any of their parents (usually the mother in the women’s adult facility). However, upon reaching the age of 13, male children are placed in the male adult facility and female children remain in the women adult facility. There are no provisions under law for the separation of unaccompanied minors; they are placed in adult facilities by gender.

Conditions in detention

According to SUHAKAM, the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia, more than 100 persons died in immigration detention in 2015 and 2016 and 521 persons did in prisons.⁶ SUHAKAM’s chairman, Tan Sri Razali Ismail, commented, “Many deaths in immigration detention centres were due to chronic health conditions such as tuberculosis, pneumonia and septicaemia.” He added that “A clear division of responsibility should be established between the ministries [Home, Finance and Health] which should cooperate in implementing an integrated health policy within immigration detention centres,” adding that Malaysia’s national health policy must be based on the belief that everyone living within our borders has a right to adequate health care.⁷

SUHAKAM has repeatedly highlighted the serious problems relating to places of detention in the Country, such as the unacceptable conditions, which fall far short of minimum standards. While detention populations are still predominantly male, more and more women and children

³ UNHCR, “Malaysia: Progress under the Global Strategy Beyond Detention 2014-2016, Mid-2016,” <http://www.unhcr.org/57b587617>

⁴ U.S. Department of State, “2016 Trafficking in Persons, Report: Malaysia,” <https://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/countries/2016/258814.htm>.

⁵ Laignee Barron, “Refugees describe death and despair in Malaysian detention centres,” The Guardian, 16 May 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/16/dozens-of-refugees-have-died-in-malaysian-detention-centres-un-reveals>.

⁶ A. Ananthlakshmi, “Malaysia rights panel disturbed over more than 600 deaths in prisons and detention centres,” Reuters, 4 April 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-malaysia-detention-deaths-idUSKBN1760S3>.

⁷ The Star Online, “Suhakam: Refugees underway at immigration detention centres,” 1 April 2017, <http://hakam.org.my/wp/index.php/2017/04/01/suhakam-reforms-underway-at-immigration-detention-centres/>.

are being held in places of detention without many of the necessary changes in infrastructure. SUHAKAM has observed that the growth of the detention population is not accompanied by an increase in the necessary resources such as budget. This has an impact on the entire system, which in turn results in greater pressure on the facility administration and staff.”⁸

Adult women and men are held separately in immigration detention. There are no family detention units within immigration detention centres and at times families are separated and detained in different immigration depots in the country.⁹ For 2015, UNHCR reported 912 children still in detention, down from 1,406 children detained in from January to October 2013 according to SUHAKAM.

The independent institution has denounced dire conditions and overcrowding for many years. In its 2016 Annual Report it stated “Detainees, particularly those in immigration detention centres live for long periods in overcrowded cells without enough room to move or to sleep. Further, being confined in a small space, often in insanitary conditions makes deprivation of liberty more challenging. Not only is the human dignity aspect of detainees eroded, but their mental, emotional and physical health sometimes deteriorates further.”¹⁰ In particular, following visits to places of detention in 2016, SUHAKAM denounced the dilapidated conditions at the Juru Immigration Detention Centre and Pekan Nenas Immigration Detention Centre. The Public Works Department also acknowledged that many parts of the Pekan Nenas centre were “unfit and unsafe to be occupied” including the female block.

Another Malaysian oversight body, the Enforcement Agency Integrity Commission (EAIC) has also denounced conditions in detention, including overcrowding, and poor conditions of hygiene. Although government statistics on deaths in detention were not disaggregated, women are also reportedly dying in detention, and not only because of health and overcrowding conditions. EAIC commented on allegations from Cambodian women detained in January 2016 who “had claimed to have witnessed physical abuse of detainees at the Juru detention centre [... and] alleged that three women had died at the centre due to the purported “torture”, while another four female detainees died at a hospital. The Immigration Department’s Director-General stated in August 2016 that the death of abuse were “untrue” according to a preliminary investigation.”¹¹

In spite of this conclusion EAIC recommended that a new centre should replace the Juru detention centre and for “the Ministry of Health (MOH) to ensure that a medical officer is placed at all immigration detention centres and that medical facilities including medicine are adequately supplied to the centres; and to revise the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) of immigration detention centres to ensure that they are at least on par with the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners and the Lock-Up Rules 1953; and to emulate the prison system by appointing a visiting justice to monitor conditions of immigration detention centres.”¹²

II. Key Questions for Malaysia

⁸ SUHAKAM, Annual Report 2016 , <http://www.suhakam.org.my/pusat-media/sumber/laporan-tahunan/>.

⁹ SUHAKAM, *Report on Alternatives to Immigration Detention*, November 2013. Available at: <http://www.suhakam.org.my/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Report-on-Roundtable-on-ATD-Malaysia.pdf>.

¹⁰ SUHAKAM, Annual Report 2016 , <http://www.suhakam.org.my/pusat-media/sumber/laporan-tahunan/>.

¹¹ Malay Mail Online, “EAIC says advised Immigration Dept to put CCTVs at detention depots,” 18 August 2016, <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/eaic-says-advised-immigration-dept-to-put-cctvs-at-detention-depots> .

¹² SUHAKAM, Annual Report 2016 , <http://www.suhakam.org.my/pusat-media/sumber/laporan-tahunan/>.

Despite the dire situation of immigration detention outlined above, the Combined third to fifth periodic reports of Malaysia¹³ to be reviewed by CEDAW fail to address the situation of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrant women in detention in Malaysia. Any effort to assess immigration detention should address the following questions:

- How many women are placed in immigration detention per year?
- What steps is the government taking to ensure that women do not die in immigration detention? Have there been enquiries about the number and causes of death in immigration detention for women?
- How does the government ensure that women's specific protection needs (including protection against sexual exploitation and violence) are ensured during detention?
- Where are women placed in immigration detention? Are they placed in facilities monitored by women wardens? Can the government provide a comprehensive list of prisons and depots that are used to hold women in immigration detention?
- Does the government provide alternatives to detention for the most vulnerable of women (e.g. pregnant and lactating mothers, asylum seeking and refugee women and girls, those with significant physical or mental health needs)? And if not are there plans to do so?
- What mechanism is in place to ensure that refugees and asylum-seekers, in particular women and girls, are not penalized for illegal entry and stay in the country, and that detention of asylum seekers and migrants is only used as a last resort where necessary and for as short period as possible?
- Which organisations/institutions have regular access to visit places of immigration detention? Can they carry out regular and unannounced visits?

¹³ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, " Combined third to fifth periodic reports of States parties due in 2012 Malaysia," CEDAW/C/MYS/3-5, 17 October 2016, http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/SessionDetails1.aspx?SessionID=1156&Lang=en.

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