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One million on haj waiting list

BACKLOG: Tabung Haji delegation to appeal to Saudi govt to maintain quota

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THERE are close to one million would-be haj pilgrims on the waiting list in Malaysia, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Jamil Khir Baharom said yesterday.

Jamil said the government was worried as it would take some time to clear the backlog based on the 28,000 yearly quota given by the Saudi Arabian government.

"I hope that there will be no interference while we try to resolve this issue regarding the quota as any disruption will only increase the backlog," he said after delivering his a speech at the "Understanding of Wasatiyyah and 1Malaysia" seminar here.

He said a delegation from Tabung Haji, led by its senior managing director Datuk Syed Saleh Syed Abdul Rahman, would go to Saudi Arabia this week to pass a letter to the kingdom's officials, urging them to maintain the quota for Malaysia.

"God willing, we will know the outcome by the time the delegation returns home," he said.

He added that the preparations for this year's pilgrimage were in its final stages.

The issue of the haj quota arose following the opposition-backed Bersih demonstrations in Mecca and Medina on April 26.

The Saudi Arabian government had said it was considering restricting the entry of Malaysian pilgrims following the demonstrations.

In **Kuala Lumpur**, a Tabung Haji spokesman explained that the selection of pilgrims was on a first-come-first-served basis.

"Malaysian Muslims are encouraged to plan and register early to perform the haj. This will mean that those with an earlier registration date (and time) will be selected earlier," the spokesman said.

He said the number of pilgrims from each country was limited by a quota as agreed upon among members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

The quota is based on a ratio of 0.1 per cent of the total population of the country. For Malaysia, the number of pilgrims for this year is 27,900 based on our population of 27.9 million.

"The current waiting list is long, but not all who registered for haj want to go immediately as some of them are still very young (below 20 years old), so, if they decline, Tabung Haji will offer their place to the next eligible candidate."