Illegal immigrants find easy way in and out

KUALA LANGAT — Several fishing villages in coastal Selangor have become popular entry and transit points for immigrants, mostly illegal.

Residents told Malay Mail it was common for people to pay operators for a trip to or from Indonesia. The passengers would usually travel in pick-up trucks and overcrowded wooden boats.

Within six hours on Wednesday, 13 vessels and 30 were feared missing when two boats sank off Tanjung Sepat and Sepang.

Most of the 1,346 passengers on both boats were believed to be illegal immigrants from Indonesia returning home for Ramadan.

The incident has reportedly opened a can of worms on human trafficking at the fishing settlements that had previously been known as a hub for cigarette smuggling.

Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) director of operations Capt Hamid Mohd Asam said it was common for Indonesians to try and use the cheapest and easiest way home possible before Ramadan and come back to Malaysia after that.

"Last year, 70 illegal immigrants were reported missing in the sea around the same time," he said.

Hamid believed the two boats in the latest incident could have been managed by the same agent. This was because the incidents happened within hours, using the same route to Tanjung Balih, Indonesia.

"However, we are still investigating the possibility because the victims did not know the people handling their travel arrangements and only communicated through phones. Their phones have gone missing during the incidents," he told reporters at the MMEA headquarters in Kemaman.

Kelang district police chief Insp Asran Abdul Rahim said the police had made numerous arrests involving immigrants since January.

"We admit that these kinds of cases have been happening, especially here in the district," he said.

"The district police have decided on a specialized action plan, where we will study and monitor all possible loopholes in our surveillance from now. We want to minimize these activities as fast as we can, with all that we have." In the first incident on Wednesday, a boat carrying 97 people capsized near Sungai Air Hitam, off Pulau Carey in Bentong.

Sixty-three were rescued and sent to the Kelang and Bentong hospitals for treatment. 13 confirmed dead and 21 missing.

HOURS LATER, a boat carrying 27 people sank off Tanjung Sepat, Sepang. Twenty were rescued and seven missing at press time.

A villager at Kampung Kelang, near where one of the boats capsized, said the news of the incident was "normal".

"Of late, it is becoming common for us to hear these kinds of occurrences around here," he said.

A woman who sells drinks at the jetty said her husband had witnessed illegal immigrants trying to land.

"My husband, who was near the jetty mending his boat, had followed a few friends after they told him they saw police boats doing something a few kilometres away from the shore," she said.

"When he arrived, he thought he saw the police leading people from regular-looking boats into that. The next day, it was confirmed that illegal immigrants were detained in their attempt to enter the country."

The survivors in Wednesday's incidents are being investigated under the Anti-Trafficking in Person Act and the Immigration Act, and investigations are ongoing with the等相关机构's leaders and acquaintances.

Survivor rescued after more than a day at sea

PORT KLANG — Mazi left Malaysia under the cover of darkness, hoping to make it back in time for Ramadan. Instead, the Indonesian found himself clinging to a barrel for 28 hours after the boat he was on capsized.

The 37-year-old said the boat was filled with fellow immigrants looking to return home, when it was hit by strong winds, causing seawater to spill in and spoil the boat's engine.

This latest incident follows another boat capsizing near Sungai Air Hitam, near Pulau Carey.

"All of us panicked and the next thing we knew we were in the boat capsizing. I immediately grabbed onto the first barrel I saw and I didn't let go of it until about 9am the next day when I was rescued by one of the ships around the area," he said.

Mazi and 13 others were found by three merchant ships, whose crew then alerted the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA).

The incident happened 10.5 nautical miles off Tanjung Sepat Selatan, Sepang. MMEA confirmed the boat, which could hold 10 people, had left Pantai Marang at 3am Wednesday and capsized two hours later.

As of yesterday evening, 20 of the 27 indonesians have been rescued while the missing include a two-year-old child.

Three of them have been sent to Kelantan Hospital while another three were sent to Sungai Buloh Hospital. They are being treated for dehydration and exhaustion.

MMEA and the Indonesian embassy have not found any documentation for the passengers of both incidents assisting the country legally but they hold Indonesian identification.

Mazi, who has been staying in Malaysia since 1996, said it was his first time traveling home illegally.

"Usually I will get a proper permit and go home in a much safer way, but this is a much cheaper mode of transport," said Mazi, who paid RM650 for his passage home. His legal status in the country is unknown, but according to Mazi, he was working as a chicken seller at a wet market in Petaling Jaya and was travelling alone.

Another survivor, Dahlia, said she was on the boat which was seven-month pregnant sister-in-law and her niece.

"I paid RM750 to her and she promised everything for me," said Dahlia, who has been in the country for only five months.

Her sister-in-law has been admitted into Sungai Buloh Hospital for treatment, but her two-year-old child is still missing.

"I was so overwhelmed with what was happening that I just jumped off and struggled until three men on the boat threw a float at me," said Dahlia.