'Govt helping couple in Sweden'

By Tasnim Lokman, Adrian Lai and A. Azim Idris

KUALA LUMPUR: The government is doing all it can to help the Malaysian couple detained in Sweden for allegedly hitting their child, and their four children, who have been placed with a non-Muslim foster family appointed by the Swedish authorities.

Foreign Affairs Minister Datuk Seri Anifah Aman said the ministry had sent officials to discuss the children's wellbeing with the Swedish welfare department, particularly on the issue of them being under the care of a non-Muslim family.

"Firstly, we have asked that the children be put under the care of Muslims and Malaysians. The proposal is still under consideration.

"Secondly, the parents still do not have access to their children. However, our officials have met them. According to a report, the children are doing fine, but they said they preferred to be put under the care of a Muslim family. The children also said they wanted to return to Malaysia.

"We are doing everything possible to speed up the legal process so that they can be cared for by Muslims or be sent back to their relatives in Malaysia," he told a press conference at the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Affairs here yesterday.

Tourism Malaysia director in Stockholm Azizul Raheem Awalludin and his wife, Shalwati Nurshal, a teacher, were arrested on Dec 18 last year for disciplining their son for not praying.

He also said the ministry had no plans to send legal representatives to monitor the case.

"We have not yet come to that stage, but we have discussed this possibility with the Tourism and Culture Ministry. They don't have the same privileges as diplomats because Tourism Malaysia is not a diplomatic entity.

"The couple is being represented by Swedish lawyers, as it is normal practice for any government to give legal aid to cases of this instance."

Meanwhile, the ministry, in a statement, said it was in the midst of securing the necessary approval for the four children to be moved from the appointed local foster parents to a Malaysian Muslim family in Sweden.

A Bernama report said the ministry had requested for a legal team from the government to hold a watching brief during the trial.

"Since the day of their arrest, the ministry, through the Malaysian embassy in Stockholm, has been providing assistance to the accused couple in many different ways."
Through diplomatic channels, the ministry said, it issued a Diplomatic Note from the Malaysian government to the government of Sweden on several occasions in seeking the latter's attention and good judgment.

"Official representations were made by the Malaysian ambassador to Sweden to the highest level of the relevant authorities."

It said the remand of the Malaysian couple had caused anxiety among the Malaysian public, especially with the case being prolonged.

The ministry pledged that it would mobilise all available means for the case to be resolved and for the rights of the couple and their children to be safeguarded.

The statement said Sweden upheld strong views on human rights and the protection of children.

"This, however, would not diminish ongoing efforts undertaken by the ministry in promoting the rights and protection, welfare and safety of all the Malaysians involved."

A source close to the family told the New Straits Times that relatives would only be allowed to see the children after investigations were completed.

He said as much as they appreciated the support, the public must not make general assumptions and compare it with other cases in the past as each case was different with its own reasons and circumstances.

"We must respect the law in that country. Now, it is up to the public prosecutor to justify the arrest in court. Relatives are praying that the interests of the parents and children are well taken care of, as they have a right to a fair trial," he said.

Yesterday, representatives from the Malaysia Muslim People's Coalition (IRIMM) and Malaysian Muslim Economy and Social Council (DESMMA) handed over a memorandum to the Swedish embassy here.

The memorandum, which called for the couple's release, was presented to the Swedish Deputy Head of Mission Minister Counsellor Sven Theus Malmberg by IRIMM president Amir Amsaa Alla Pitchay and DESMMA president Mohd Fazil Abdullah.

"The deputy head of mission himself felt this was a minor issue and will bring it up to the Swedish authorities to find a quick solution," Fazil said.

In Putrajaya, Umno Youth Community Complaints Bureau chairman Nafiq Alfirdaous Sheikh Ahmad said the bureau and Malaysian Volunteer Lawyers Association (Sukaguam) would be sending members to Sweden to assist.

"We will try to get the children placed with a Muslim foster family, but we will not go beyond the limits of Swedish laws," he said after a meeting with Wisma Putra Consular Secretary Yaacob Mat Deris.