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Malaysia axes boat people marker

By Jonathan Kent
BBC, Kuala Lumpur

The Malaysian government has ordered that a memorial erected by former Vietnamese boat people on an island where they were interned be torn down.

The memorial was unveiled this year

The move follows complaints from the Vietnamese government.

The memorial commemorates the thousands of boat people who died fleeing their homeland following the reunification of Vietnam in 1975.

Some quarter of a million Vietnamese refugees passed through Bidong island between 1975 and 1991.

The marble memorial was built at the request of a group of former detainees now settled in Australia and the United States who visited the island in March.

One plaque on the monument speaks of the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese people who perished on the way to freedom.

Another thanks the people and the government of Malaysia and the Malaysian Red Crescent society for the help they gave the refugees.

However, the memorial has upset the Vietnamese government.

It complained to Malaysia's Foreign Ministry, which in turn has asked the state government in Terengganu which administers the island, to tear down the monument.

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A source within the ministry said that Vietnam is still struggling with its history, and to preserve good relations the Malaysian authorities decided to respect Hanoi's wishes.

However the move is expected to draw criticism from the overseas Vietnamese community. The Vietnamese embassy in Kuala Lumpur was not immediately available for comment.

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