

Dr M: Better ties only after Manila drops claim

KUALA LUMPUR: It is difficult for Malaysia to have full relations with the Philippines so long as Manila maintained its claim over Sabah, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday.

The Prime Minister said the issue, which had persisted for so many years, would have to be resolved by the Philippine Government.

"This is an entirely internal matter.

"We cannot do anything about it," Dr Mahathir said when asked to comment on Manila's attempt to get its Senate to drop the claim.

On Sunday, Philippine Foreign Secretary Roberto Romulo said the new Philippine Government did not intend to proceed with the claim.

Meanwhile in Manila, a senator said the Philippine Senate would oppose any government move to

drop the claim unless border problems and other pending issues are resolved first.

"Any concessions on Sabah that disregard these requirements will meet with resistance in the Senate," said Mr Blas Ople, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

"Any new initiative to drop the Sabah claim will have to take account of the need for adequate un-

derstandings concerning our maritime borders and economic zones, the status of 300,000 Filipinos now in Sabah, customs and border patrol arrangements and, not least, the private claims of the heirs of the Sultan of Sulu," he said.

Romulo, who returned to Manila yesterday, said he had told Malaysian leaders the Philippine Government would not pursue its territorial

claim but could not drop it outright without the approval of the Senate.

"We must defer to the legislature until they have made their final position on this," he said.

President Fidel Ramos said in a statement the decision not to pursue the claim to Sabah was "based on the Philippines' desire to contribute to Asean solidarity and peace and stability in South-East Asia."