

Philippine govt prepared to negotiate Sabah cl&m: Arroyo

SUN - 9 01 06 2001

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KLJALA LUMPUR, Wed: The Philippine government has not abandoned its claim over Sabah, but it is now prepared to negotiate a possible resolution with Malaysia.

Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo said she discussed the matter with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at their one-to-one meeting yesterday, and both agreed "to move forward and seek a cordial resolution".

She said an extensive study will be needed, and panels will be formed to look into ways of approaching the territorial dispute.

Arroyo was speaking at a press conference after delivering a keynote address at the Malaysia-Philippines Business Forum here today.

The forum was attended by Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Syed

Abbar, who read out Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's speech.

"He (Mahathir) understands that we will have to do this slowly and with extensive consultations with our constituents, and we will have to form panels to study how this issue can be approached," Arroyo said.

Asked if that meant that the government would drop its claims, she replied: "No, I am not saying that. I am saying it will take a long time and extensive consultation to resolve the issue."

The Philippines' claim over Sabah dates back to the 18th century, when the Sultan of Brunei ceded part of the then North Borneo to the Sultan of Sulu in Southern Philippines.

The Sabah issue has been an irritant in Kuala Lumpur-Manila relations since the late President Diosdado Macapagal, Arroyo's father, revived the claim when Sabah joined Malaysia in 1968.

Arroyo, who led a 90-member delegation on a three-day official visit here, will return home tomorrow.

On a related matter, she said the republic's foreign ministry intervened in the Sipidan-Ligitan island dispute between Malaysia and Indonesia because it was duty-bound to do so "as long as the claim of Philippines on Sabah is there".

The Philippines had applied to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in March to intervene in the dispute, a move that drew protests from the two claimants, who felt that it had no basis for intervention.

Nevertheless, the ICJ in The Hague conducted a four-day public hearing that started on June 25 for the three parties to present their cases.

According to the Philippines, the decision, expected to be announced by year-end, will have an impact on its claim over Sabah.