

Arroyo: Sabah claim issue closer to cordial resolution

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. — Malaysia and the Philippines are closer to seeking a cordial resolution on the latter's claim on Sabah, said Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.

"It won't be swept under the rug like the previous administrations," she told a Press conference at the Shangri-La Hotel today.

Arroyo, who is here on a three-day state visit, took over as President from Joseph Estrada on Jan 20, following the famous Edsa Shrine people power.

Confirming that the Sabah issue was discussed during her meeting with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday, Arroyo said: "We agreed that we should move forward towards a cordial resolution of the issue.

"Of course, we understand that we'll have to do this slowly and with extensive consultations with

our constituents.

"So we are going to have to form panels to study how this issue can be approached," she said.

Arroyo, who is making her first state visit overseas after taking power, arrived to a red carpet welcome yesterday. She leaves for Davao tomorrow.

She said Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Teofisto Guingona, who is also the republic's Vice-President, would begin working on the matter immediately.

"It is only now that Prime Minister Mahathir and I even discussed the possibility of finally resolving the issue."

She was also asked whether there was a possibility that Manila would drop its claim on Sabah.

She said: "No, I'm not saying that. I'm just saying it will take a long time and extensive consultations to resolve the issue. So, I'm not prepared to give any statements about that now."

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Dr Mahathir a model of pragmatism, says Arroyo

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Arroyo said she would consult the people in southern Philippines and other Filipinos on the matter.

Asked why the Philippines was seeking to intervene in the territorial dispute between Malaysia and Indonesia over the islands of Sipadan and Ligitan at the International Court of Justice, Arroyo said Manila was bound to intervene in any international proceedings that had to do with the islands and its claim on Sabah.

The President also described her visit to Malaysia as a meaningful step in the Philippines' journey towards lasting peace and prosperity.

"I especially thank Dr Mahathir for his kind words yesterday in which he reiterated to our Filipino Muslim brothers the caveat on fighting and secession. I admire the Prime Minister. He is a model of the right blend of pragmatism and vision," she said, dubbing Malaysia as the "melting pot of the East".

Arroyo said she appreciated Malaysia's support for her stand that ransom should not be paid to the Abu Sayyaf rebels in exchange for people kidnapped by them.

"We'll bite the bullet once and for all. We can stay out of the headlines by paying ransoms, but they (the Abu Sayyaf) will just strike again and again."

Arroyo, who is commander-in-chief of the Philippine Armed Forces by virtue of her presidency, has ordered an all-out assault on the Abu Sayyaf to end their atrocities in the southern Philippines.