

Misuari's arrest will enhance KL-Manila ties: Analysts

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THE arrest by Malaysian police of Nur Misuari, a renegade Philippines Muslim leader, will enhance ties between the two South-East Asian neighbours, diplomats and analysts say.

The capture of 60-year-old Misuari, who organised a doomed revolt in the autonomous southern Philippine island of Jolo, demonstrates Kuala Lumpur's support for Manila, they said.

"I believe that the arrest of Misuari by the Malaysian police has strengthened Philippine-Malaysia relations," Jose Brillantes, Philippines' ambassador to Kuala Lumpur said.

He said the quick response by Malaysia to the Philippines' request to detain Misuari "is an indication of its unqualified support and cooperation with the Philippines government".

"Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and President Gloria Arroyo have a strong and cordial relationship. Arroyo telephoned to thank Dr Mahathir after Misuari was detained," he said.

Brillantes said Malaysia's assistance to apprehend Misuari showed that the southern Philippines issue "is not religious or ethnic in nature not

it is a discrimination of a minority group".

"Misuari's arrest reflects Malaysia's sincere cooperation with the Philippines to fight terrorism," he added.

With the warming of ties, Mahathir is expected to visit Manila next year, a senior diplomat said.

A top Malaysian official said ties with Manila had considerably improved after Arroyo replaced deposed leader Joseph Estrada who irked Dr Mahathir by meeting Wan Az-

izah Wan Ismail, the wife of jailed ex-deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, in Kuala Lumpur in November 1998.

The official, who requested anonymity, said Malaysia strongly favoured an early deportation of Misuari rather than charge him in court for illegal entry.

Abdul Razak Baginda, executive director of the Malaysian Strategic Research Centre, added that Malaysia's decision to arrest Misuari "will solidify their relations". But ties between the two countries are weighed down by an influx of Filipino illegals and cross border crimes committed by Filipinos, he said.

"Their relationship is not a special relationship compared with Malaysia-Singapore ties. I do not regard it as outstanding," Abdul Razak said.

Asian diplomats warn that Muslim-majority Malaysia could earn the anger of local Muslims and the 57-member Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) if it acts against Misuari or deports him.

"Malaysia knows that if it takes action against Misuari, it could alienate a cross section of domestic Muslims," one diplomat said.

Another said Malaysia may be under pressure by the OIC to grant Misuari access to a third country which Malaysia has ruled out.

"The open support shown by Malaysia for the (Christian-dominated) Philippines may elicit flak from the OIC," he said.

The OIC brokered a peace agreement between the Philippines and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNL) in 1996.

Misuari fled the Philippines on November 24 after allegedly masterminding a series of attacks on security installations in Jolo in which at least 113 people died.

He reportedly staged the revolt after Arroyo backed a rival faction within his MNL in polls for the post of governor of the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).

Mahathir has said Misuari will not be granted asylum by Malaysia, which gave him and his guerrillas sanctuary in the early 1970s.

Mahathir had criticised Misuari's MNL faction for failing to develop the ARMM, of which he had been governor since signing a peace treaty with Manila in 1996. — AFP