

'Misuari case being handled carefully'

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He has not asked for political asylum, says Mahathir

By **Ferida Abdul Kudhus**

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs: Malaysia is handling the Nur Misuari issue carefully so that Kuala Lumpur is not accused of collaborating with terrorists, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The prime minister said the government will have to decide on the Philippine Muslim leader's status if Manila refuses to take him back.

"We are ready to send him back but they (the Philippines) have to accept

him. We will negotiate with them.

"If they don't take him back for whatever reason, we will have to think of his status as he did not commit any crime in this country.

"However, we hope we won't come to that as we don't want people to say we are collaborating with terrorists," he told a press conference after tabling the 2002 Budget in Dewan Negara.

Asked whether Misuari, the former governor of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao in southern Philippines, has asked for political asylum.

Mahathir said there was no such request. (Reuters quoted a lawyer as saying Misuari has filed a petition with the United Nations for political asylum.)

Mahathir said the authorities had questioned Misuari on the cause of the rebellion in Mindanao and whether he was involved in the kidnapping at Sipadan island.

Asked whether Malaysia will propose a time-frame for Manila to take Misuari back, he said: "Misuari has put Malaysia in a spot. Why can't he run away somewhere else? He creates trouble there and

runs to Malaysia.

"It sours our relations with our neighbour.

"We have to be very careful in handling it."

Misuari was arrested with six followers in a pre-dawn raid on Pulau Jampiras, off Sabah, on Nov 24 for illegal entry.

The cabinet yesterday reaffirmed its decision to deport him, but has to wait for word from Manila, which wants him to be prosecuted under Malaysian law first.

Sources told *The Sun* that the Immigration Department and police are still investigating.