

Send Misuari back after Christmas, says Manila

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon: Philippine President Gloria Arroyo wants Malaysia to detain Muslim leader Nur Misuari over Christmas before handing him to Manila, an Arroyo emissary said.

Misuari, a former separatist leader, is facing rebellion charges for an armed revolt by his followers in southern Philippines last month.

"We are discussing how (Misuari's deportation) will not cause trouble," AFP quoted Arroyo aide Norbeto Gonzales telling reporters in Manila today.

He said "the holidays should be considered" in discussing the handover.

Asked if Manila would rather have Misuari in January, Gonzales said: "That's the date we're looking at."

Mahathir warned yesterday that he would deport Misuari to a third country if Manila declined to take him back, but he gave no timetable.

Malaysian officials earlier told Manila that the 60-year-old Misuari, who fled to Sabah and detained for ille-

gal entry on Nov 24, can only be held until Dec 24.

"The 24th (of December) is a formality, and we would have no choice but to take him into custody on the 24th. But there is this holiday season, and maybe we could stretch that until the opening of the (new) year, depending on the arrangements," Gonzales said.

Misuari has filed for asylum with the United Nations refugee agency through his lawyer in Washington.

He faces rebellion charges, punishable by a 20-year jail sentence, for allegedly instigating the revolt which claimed more than 100 lives.

In Putrajaya, Philippine Ambassador to Malaysia Jose S. Brillantes said Philippine authorities are preparing for Misuari's eventual deportation while the Malaysian government has indicated that it is winding-up interrogations.

"The limit will most probably be not later than Dec 24, going by the 30-day rule.

"I think there is no room for conjecture or other interpretations," he said.