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Dr M: No date fixed yet for deportation

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PUTRAJAYA, Mon. - Malaysia has yet to decide on a date to deport renegade Moro National Liberation Front leader Nur Misuari back to the Philippines, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

"We will wait and discuss (with Manila)," he told reporters at his open house for dignitaries in Seri Perdana.

Dr Mahathir was asked if the Philippine authorities had informed their Malaysian counterparts when the former governor of the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao would be sent back.

Yesterday, Dr Mahathir reiterated that Misuari would be sent to a third country if Manila was reluctant to have him back.

Misuari, 61, was arrested together with six MNLF followers on Jampiras Island, Sandakan on Nov 24.

Under immigration laws, Misuari who entered Malaysia illegally, can be held for 30 days, and the period expires on Dec 24.

Misuari is facing rebellion charges for an armed revolt by his armed followers in the southern Philippines last month.

Meanwhile, the Philippines ambassador Jose S. Brillantes said the Malaysian and Philippines authorities were finalising the arrangement on Misuari's eventual deportation but refused to reveal "the actual date".

"The details are better kept confidential for security reasons," he said, adding that he was confident that the 30-day limit could be met.

He said the authorities of both countries should be allowed to do their jobs and "I am sure everything will turn out right".

Speaking to reporters at the Prime Minister's residence, he said there was no room for conjecture or other interpretations as the highest Malaysian and Philippines authorities had already spoken to each other.

"I think there is no indication that the event is going to be any different than already stated. The bottomline is the Philippines is preparing for his return and the Malaysian authorities are preparing to send him back," he added.

Philippine President Gloria Macapagal had said Manila was ready to take back Misuari, and they did not want him to be a burden to Malaysia. Plans had been made to bring him back where he would be placed in confinement and charged.

In Manila, AFP quotes Arroyo aide Norberto Gonzales as saying that the President wanted Malaysia to keep Misuari over Christmas before handing him back to the Philippines.

Gonzales said he carried the President's letter to Kuala Lumpur last Thursday.

"We are discussing how (Misuari's deportation) will not cause trouble," Gonzales said.

He said "the holidays should be considered" in discussing the handover. The Philippines is mainly Roman Catholic.

Asked if Manila would rather have Misuari back in January, Gonzales said: "That's the date we're looking at. The 24th (of December) is a formality, and we would have no choice but to take him into custody on Dec 24.

"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 UN refugee agency.

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