

21/12/2001

Manila wants Misuari back soon to stand trial, says Syed Hamid

Firdaus Abdullah; Abdul Razak Ahmad

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Manila has made it clear that it wants deposed Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao leader Nur Misuari back soon to stand trial for rebellion.

Philippines President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo conveyed this to Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar in a meeting at the Malacanang Palace in Manila today.

Syed Hamid, who flew to Manila this afternoon in his capacity as a member of the Organisation of Islamic Conference's Ministerial Committee of Eight, sought clarifications from the Philippines Government over the contradictory statements which came out of Manila over Misuari.

"There were mixed signals as to whether the Philippines wanted him back or to have him sent to a third country.

"But Manila has now made it clear that it wants him back," he said in a telephone conversation from his hotel room in Manila.

Syed Hamid, joined by Indonesian Foreign Minister Dr Hasan Wiraduya, who is also chairman of the Committee of Eight, conveyed the OIC's concern for Misuari's safety and treatment after his deportation.

Syed Hamid added that Arroyo was appreciative of the Malaysian Government's decision to deport Misuari.

Prior to meeting Arroyo, Syed Hamid had a marathon closed-door meeting with Wiraduya and Philippine Vice-President Teofisto Guingona.

Guingona, who is also the Philippine Foreign Secretary, chaired the meeting which began at 3pm at the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs.

After the meeting, Syed Hamid and Dr Hasan held a separate meeting with Misuari's successor Dr Farouk Hussein, the newly-elected Governor of ARMM, to explain the current state of affairs.

Several senior government officials from both Malaysia and Indonesia were also present during the meeting with Dr Farouk. They later had dinner with Arroyo at the Malacanang Palace.

Malaysia and Indonesia are on the Committee of Eight, which monitors the implementation of the 1996 peace pact in southern Mindanao.

Misuari was arrested while trying to enter Malaysia on Nov 24 amid a Philippine military manhunt for him following a deadly attack by his followers on an army camp in Jolo.

About 100 people died in the fighting.

The Immigration Act allows the Malaysian authorities to detain Misuari for 30 days.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, speaking in Changlun, Kedah, reiterated Malaysia's firm stand to deport Misuari to the Philippines.

Commenting on a letter which had reportedly been sent to him by Misuari's lawyer requesting temporary political asylum, Dr Mahathir said the Government needed to examine the situation.

"This is because we have promised to send back those who are involved in violence who enter our country," he said.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia could not renege on its promise to deport those who ran to Malaysia after creating problems in their own countries.

Malaysia, he said, would then be placed in a difficult position to go after its own citizens who created problems and run to another country.

"As such, sometimes we have to take strict action under the law."

Asked whether "strict action" in this case meant the deportation of Misuari, the Prime Minister replied, "yes".

Dr Mahathir said that Misuari should not have come to Malaysia after creating problems in his own country.

"He has put us in a difficult position (serba-salah).

"We do not want to be enemies with others; if he had stayed (in the Philippines) and fought there then it is his business.

"He shouldn't have come here when things turned bad."

To another question, Dr Mahathir said that no date had been fixed for Misuari's deportation.

Philippine National Security Adviser Roilo Golez said an option of allowing the former guerilla leader to gain foreign asylum had not been ruled out. It has been widely speculated that Libya is willing to give him political asylum.