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`Malaysia will not intervene'

Cheah Chor Sooi

PUTRAJAYA, Sat. - Malaysia will not intervene in the newly-erupted war in the southern Philippines nor offer any protection to rebel leader Nur Misuari, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

He said Malaysia no longer felt obliged to support Misuari, who is also the leader of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), as he had failed to carry out his duties as a responsible leader.

"This is an internal matter of the Philippines and we should not intervene by giving protection to the rebels.

"He had not done much to improve the welfare of the Muslim population after his election as governor.

"Despite receiving profound support from Malaysia in its previous peace negotiations with the Philippines Government, he was prepared to carry out another revolt.

"This goes to show that he is not complying with the wishes of the majority of the population in the southern Philippines," Dr Mahathir said after launching the WorldSpace Digital Audio Broadcasting Service, which is provided by Asiaspace Dotcom Sdn Bhd, at his office here.

Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo was reported to have spoken to Dr Mahathir yesterday, requesting the latter's help to end the fresh revolt.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia's "one and only" commitment in the civil war would be not to allow terrorists from using the country as an operational base.

"We will uphold our promise that we will co-operate with all countries to halt terrorism," Dr Mahathir said, noting that Malaysia would not grant political asylum to Misuari.

"We had done all that was necessary in the past, including helping him secure an autonomy area, so that he could fulfil his promise to the people of the southern Philippines.

"However, after being in power, he was rarely in the southern Philippines to oversee the development of the region. Instead, he spent most of his time abroad or in Manila."

Hundreds of former rebels launched an armed uprising on the southern island of Jolo last Tuesday in an apparent attempt by Misuari, who is also the MNLF chairman, to derail local elections scheduled for Nov 26.

Once the largest separatist group, MNLF signed a peace agreement with the Philippine Government in 1996, accepting autonomy and dropping its bid for independence.

Misuari was subsequently elected governor of a Muslim autonomous region in Mindanao.

The peace talks were brokered by the Organisation of Islamic Conference, in which Malaysia is an active member.

Following the armed uprising, Arroyo recently stripped Misuari of his powers as governor of the southern autonomous region.

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