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Seize opportunities for growth, says Ramos

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KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Relations between the Philippines and Malaysia will not be helped if they are continuously dominated by territorial claims, such as the one made by the Philippines on Sabah, former Filipino President Fidel Ramos said today.

Calling upon both countries to seize opportunities for mutual growth instead, Ramos humourously likened the Sabah claim row to internal family bickering.

"It's like not wanting to quarrel with your mother-in-law all the time because you want to have a better future for your family," he said after attending a breakfast-meeting and dialogue session with the Malaysia-Philippines Business Council at the Legend Hotel, here.

Also present was Filipino Finance Secretary Jose Isidro N. Camacho.

The International Court of Justice in The Hague, Netherlands, is currently in a round of public hearings to determine if the Philippines can intervene in a territorial dispute between Malaysia and Indonesia.

The Philippines is reportedly concerned that the proceedings before the court might have a bearing on the legality of Sabah, to which Manila holds historic claims as well.

Ramos said the Filipino involvement in the current ICJ hearing is not tantamount to making an outright case for a claim on Sabah.

"It is (merely) an intervention provided for under the rules of the ICJ which allows any third party to register its desire to intervene in order to protect its own national interests."

Apart from the meeting today, Ramos also spoke at the three-day World Economic Development Congress in Kuala Lumpur which ended yesterday.

He described his current role as "super salesman" for the Philippine economy and as a special representative to President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.

Asked why each successive Philippine Government administration seemed intent on pursuing the Sabah claim issue, Ramos replied:

"The issue is not coming from us, it is coming from the newspapers and sometimes by the foreign writers writing about this."

Asked why the Philippine Government was maintaining its claim on Sabah, Ramos said:

"I made a State visit here in February 1993, where I sought Prime Minister (Datuk Seri Dr) Mahathir Mohamad and said to him: 'Let us look at the future more than the past and create opportunities.'"

Ramos was also asked on the controversy surrounding the proposed involvement of Malaysian negotiators to help resolve an ongoing hostage situation in the southern Philippines.

He said Arroyo's policy on the matter was clear.

"Her's is a very firm policy of 'no deals' except for the safe recovery of the hostages. No ransom."

On enhancing economic ties between the two countries, Ramos invited Malaysian Information Technology companies to consider engaging the services of the large pool of highly-skilled knowledge workers in the Philippines.