

KL assures Manila over detainees

STAR - 5 SEP 2002

**By MUGUNTAN VANAR
and RUBEN SARIO**

KOTA KINABALU: Malaysia has given an assurance to the Philippines that it will look into the plight of mothers and children and whatever shortcomings faced by illegal immigrants detained at transit camps in Sabah.

The Malaysian authorities have also made another offer to illegal Filipino immigrants to come out from hiding and obtain travel documents to enable them to return to their country.

After concluding visits to the temporary immigration detention depots in Tawau, Sandakan and Mengattal near here, the head of the seven-member fact-finding Filipino team Nur Jaafar said that he was given the assurance by Malaysian officials that steps would be taken to improve facilities at the centres.

Jaafar told reporters, after seeing the condition at the centres, that he has spoken with President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo over the phone yesterday.

He said the president had directed him to immediately resolve problems related to Filipino detainees waiting deportation, in particular on the condition of women and children.

"She has also asked me to speed up sending home of Filipinos currently held at the centres," he said, adding that

his team was compiling complaints made by detained Filipinos. He said his government hopes that the detention of women and children was in accordance with international human rights laws.

On the findings of his team so far, Jaafar said that the common complaint was congestion at the centres and insufficient food, particularly the need for more food, milk and vitamins for the children.

"We have to also address the various concerns we have discussed and agreed upon with the Malaysian authorities as a moratorium (suspension of action and deportation of Filipinos) remains in play following Arroyo's request to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad last week." Among the requests made by the Philippines were for more entry points into Sabah for their naval vessels to ship out illegal immigrants and give time for Manila to document its citizens before being repatriated.

On the other hand, Malaysia has asked the Philippine government to emulate Indonesia by opening up consulates in Sabah so that their nationals leaving illegally could obtain proper documents to return.

However, the Philippine government was reluctant to open embassies in the state as they viewed it could mean tantamount to the dropping of the thorny issue of the Sabah claim.