

Girl mistakenly deported returns home

By RUBEN SARIO and
MERGAWATI ZULFAKAR

KOTA KINABALU: The 13-year-old Sabahan girl, who was mistakenly deported to the Philippines six months ago and had claimed that she was raped by guards at a temporary Immigration detention centre near here, finally returned home yesterday.

She was whisked from the airport to the Princess Anne children's home to be placed under the state Welfare Department's care.

Both Malaysian and Philippine officials said her allegations would be investigated and that she would be looked after.

"The welfare of the child is important at this point in time; what is important is to make sure that she will be taken care of," Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said when contacted in Putrajaya.

"She is a Malaysian. We will undertake investigation on the charges made, so that justice will be done," he said.

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The girl's return was delayed when Manila took time to process documents submitted by Malaysia to prove that she was a Malaysian.

Kuala Lumpur had expressed displeasure over the delay, saying that it would hinder ongoing investigations.

Syed Hamid said Malaysia was happy that the girl, who was detained earlier this year, had finally returned.

"We thank them for this type of understanding and co-operation," he added.

Sabah police officials boarded the Malaysia Airlines aircraft soon after it touched down from Manila at 5.15pm to take the girl to the children's home in Likas 25 minutes later.

Philippine Social Welfare

and Development Secretary Corazon Soliman and Presidential Adviser Nur Jaafar, who accompanied the girl on the flight, later arrived at the home where they were met by Minister in the Chief Minister's Department Datuk Ghapur Salleh.

Following a brief meeting with Ghapur, Soliman said the girl had been looking forward to returning to Sabah to meet her four sisters.

The girl was initially thought to be a Filipina when she could not produce any identification documents while found wondering the streets of Kota Kinabalu last year.

After her "deportation" from Sandakan last July, the girl made the rape allegations to Philippine officials.

Following this, Philippine

President Gloria Arroyo wrote to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad asking Malaysia to investigate the matter.

Police investigations eventually determined that the girl was actually a Malaysian.

Yesterday, Soliman said the girl was a victim of abandonment. Her parents were separated and the girl had been staying with her sisters and occasionally with her grandmother.

Asked whether it was true that the girl's father was a Malaysian and her mother a Filipino, Soliman said: "The Philippine and Malaysian governments have decided that this will not be a discussion point. We would prefer to look into the welfare and rights of the child."