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Arroyo happy with progress by Manila team

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SANDAKAN, Wed. - Philippine President Gloria Arroyo Macapagal is happy with the progress made by the delegation sent to Sabah to check on the alleged ill-treatment of Filipino illegal immigrants awaiting repatriation.

Arroyo's presidential adviser Nur Jaafar, who heads the 10-member delegation, said he had been reporting daily to Arroyo on the progress of their fact-finding mission.

"She is very happy with what is transpiring," he said after visiting the temporary detention centre for illegal immigrants here.

After visiting the Tawau detention centre yesterday, Nur had said he was satisfied with conditions at the centre which he described as "very good".

The fact-finding mission was a follow-up to a telephone conversation between Arroyo and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who invited the Philippine Government to come and see for itself whether the allegations were true.

The delegation arrived in Sabah on Sept 2 and had inspected the three temporary detention centres for illegal immigrants in Tawau, Menggatal in Kota Kinabalu and here.

Asked if Arroyo had given new directives to the delegation, Nur said her instruction had always been to improve the deportation process and minimise "the suffering" of the Filipinos.

While at the detention centres here, the delegation was briefed by officials of the Federal Special Task Force on the process of repatriation.

Nur declined to answer why Filipino illegal immigrants chose to return to Sabah to work despite allegations of ill-treatment.

"That should be answered by them, I cannot answer for them," he said.

However, Nur did not rule out the possibility that the Filipino illegal immigrants had fabricated the allegations because they were angry at being repatriated by the Malaysian authorities.

"Maybe this could be one of the reasons, but we are still checking and we cannot talk about things that we cannot substantiate."

At the Kota Kinabalu detention centre, Nur said Arroyo told him to give priority to the welfare of the women and children.

He said the delegation would express to the Malaysian authorities their concerns like the need for additional food, including milk and vitamins, to supplement the three daily meals of the detainees.

"Being a Muslim country, and taking into consideration that most of those to be repatriated are Muslim, Malaysia is in a position to provide better accommodation to its fellow Muslims."

The delegation spent about 45 minutes at the detention centre talking to those awaiting repatriation.

Nur Jaafar said the complaints were mainly about congestion which was already being addressed.

He said there was also a recent report on alleged rapes of illegal immigrants and this was being investigated by the Malaysian authorities.

Sabah police chief Datuk Ramli Yusof, however, said no such report had been lodged.

Nur Jaafar also said he would recommend to Arroyo to increase the number of officers sent to the State to process travel documents for Filipinos.

Meanwhile, Reuters reported that Arroyo today wrote a letter to Dr

Mahathir over the alleged sexual abuse of a teenaged Philippine girl in a detention centre in Sabah and called for swift action.