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Filipino illegals get a reprieve (HL)

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SEPANG, Sat. - The Government has agreed to temporarily halt the deportation of Filipino illegals until a mission from the Philippines arrives in Sabah to inspect the detention centres.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who said this today, however, added that there was no change in the Government's decision to repatriate Filipinos and other nationalities who had entered the country illegally.

"Yes, (Philippine President Gloria Macapagal) Arroyo called me, and asked me if we could allow a short break in sending their people home, so I agreed because they want to send somebody to see if we have been ill-treating the Filipinos."

Dr Mahathir said this after the prize-presentation ceremony of the 2002 Merdeka Millennium Endurance race at the Sepang International Circuit.

He was responding to questions from reporters about his telephone conversation with Arroyo yesterday on allegations that Filipino illegals awaiting deportation from Sabah have been ill-treated in the detention centres. "I said you can. We have no problem with that.

"It is just a temporary halt. Once they come here and they are satisfied that we are not ill-treating them (the illegals), then we will continue to send them back."

Dr Mahathir, however, said there was no shift in the Government's earlier decision to deport all illegal immigrants from Malaysia.

He also said the Philippines was not questioning Malaysia's decision or disagreeing with its deportation plans, but the request (for a temporary halt) was due to negative media reports.

"This is pertaining to something that has been reported and as far as we are concerned, they (the media reports) are not true.

"So the best solution is to let them have a look at the situation as there is nothing there (for us to hide). We have treated them well and they have been living in this country for a long time.

"... it's time for them (the illegals) to go home," he added.

Meanwhile, AFP quoted Arroyo in Manila as saying that she would send an official mission to Kuala Lumpur on Monday "to thrash out the details".