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Filipino delegation in Sabah to look into repatriation

KOTA KINABALU, Mon. - A 10-member delegation from the Philippines arrived today, hoping to remove the "irritants" in its relations with Malaysia arising from the repatriation of its citizens from Sabah.

Led by Philippine Presidential Adviser Nur Jaafar, the delegation would seek clarification on the alleged ill-treatment of its citizens at detention centres.

"We are not here to investigate but to get clarification," Nur Jaafar said.

"Our objective is to remove the irritants between the two countries that certain section of societies are taking advantage of.

"We are not saying your Government committed some mistakes, but maybe some improvement (on the repatriation process) could be agreed upon so as not to exacerbate the irritants between our people.

"We came here to ask for leniency and understanding because we share a common religion and culture, and I don't see any reasons why we cannot agree for a simplified repatriation."

He said Philippine President Gloria Arroyo was thankful to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for agreeing to the visit.

Also in the delegation are Philippine Ambassador to Malaysia, Jose Brillantes, Foreign Affairs Under Secretary Arthur Brian, Department of Labour and Employment Under Secretary Lucy Lazo, Special Concern Under Secretary Abraham Purugganan and Department of Health Under Secretary Miladros Fernandez.

They were met on arrival by Minister in the Chief Minister's Department Datuk Abdul Ghapur Salleh, State Commissioner of Police Datuk Ramli Yussuf and Fifth Infantry Brigade commander Brig-Jen Yasin Yahya.

Nur Jaafar said the Philippines would like to see the repatriation process simplified to "ease the sufferings of its citizens".

The delegation would seek Malaysia's consent to allow for more repatriation points for its citizens so that they need not travel all the way to Sandakan.

For instance, he said Filipinos in Tawau and Semporna could be sent direct to Sitangkai and Tawi-Tawi, which are nearer.

Nur said the Philippine Government was ready to deploy its naval ships to Semporna and Tawau to ferry home its citizens. But this was subject to approval from the Malaysian Government.

On the specific complaints from the Filipino deportees, he said it concerned ill-treatment and overcrowding at the detention centres.

"But it (allegation) has not been validated and that is why we are here," said Nur Jaafar, a Tawi-Tawi Congressman.

Brian said that the delegation would discuss with the authorities how the Philippines could assist in meeting the labour requirements in the State.

"This (labour) is an area of common interest for us, and we would like to see our documented citizens afforded a chance for gainful employment in the State," Brian said.

On the setting up of a Philippine trade consular office in Sabah as agreed upon by Arroyo, Brillantes said it was a separate issue.

He said there could have been no problem in the repatriation exercise had its citizens returned voluntarily during the three-month amnesty period offered by Malaysia.

"The problem arose because of the lastminute syndrome among our people. It was only when the deadline was nearing that everybody was rushing to return, causing problems to the repatriation exercise."

Tomorrow, the delegation will be given a security briefing before they visit the detention centre in Menggatal here.

On Wednesday, the delegation will visit detention centres in Tawau and Sandakan. They leave for Manila on Thursday.

In Manila, Bernama reports that Arroyo today instructed the mission to steer clear of the Sabah dispute when it meets Malaysian authorities.

Meeting the mission members for last-minute instructions, Arroyo told them to stick to the issue of illegal immigrants and work with Malaysian officials for an orderly repatriation process.

Arroyo told them to refrain from commenting on the Philippines' claim to Sabah, saying this should be left to the jurisdiction of the Department of Foreign Affairs.