

19/10/2002

Getting to grips with Filipino immigrant issue

John Teo

PASSING through Mindanao in the Philippines this week, I chanced upon an article on Filipino illegal immigrants in Sabah in the Sept 30 issue of Newsbreak magazine, which is worth quoting quite extensively:

"It was Malaysia that persuaded the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) to declare the MNLF's (Moro National Liberation Front) war in Mindanao as internal to the Philippines, putting a lid on any OIC support for secession.

"Now Kuala Lumpur is host to peace talks between the Philippine Government and the MNLF's breakaway group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front.

"In his Sept 3 meeting with the presidential adviser on special concerns Norberto Gonzales, ... (Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr) Mahathir said that Manila was warned a year ago about how serious Malaysia was in its crackdown on illegal migrants.

"As early as the 1960s, Malaysia conducted a referendum among Filipino refugees in Sabah to ask them if they preferred to be under the Philippine or Malaysian Government. The majority voted in favour of Malaysia, says retired Zamboanga professor Amil Hussin Jumaani.

"The situation turned for the worse in 2000 when Abu Sayyaf bandits kidnapped tourists on Sipadan ... Many Filipinos in Sabah have been linked to crimes, and this has aggravated the situation.

"As early as last January, the Philippine Government was warned that Malaysia meant business.

"On April 28, the Department of Foreign Affairs sent three of its consular employees to assist the 400,000 'deportable' Filipinos in Sabah...

"This hapless team got a back-up of five more people only last August, when the deportation reached its peak. On Sept 1, another 15-member team was sent to Sabah.

"Since March, the (Philippine) Embassy in Kuala Lumpur has repeatedly been asking DFA for more funds and personnel, but the department was having a hard time realigning its funds.

"Thus, the inevitable happened: thousands of Filipinos were cramped in Sabah's three detention centres, waiting to be issued travel documents before the August deadline.

"What could have been done on a staggered basis for a period of four months - from April when the deportation campaign was launched - was rushed in a month. It was chaos.

"Things moved slowly largely because the Philippine Government presence in Sabah is nil. The ultimate reason for this is the Government's claim over Sabah, which Manila has not completely given up but is not vigorously pursuing, either.

"Many in the Government still (think) Manila should use Sabah as leverage with Malaysia in negotiating better terms for Filipinos there. But other diplomats believe pursuing the claim has become unrealistic.

"Some years ago, Malaysia celebrated its national day in Sabah, and Philippine diplomats graced the occasion with nary a protest. Manila should therefore stop the pretence, says a senior DFA official, because this has deprived Filipinos of full-time consular services there.

"The Sultanate of Sulu, which has proprietary rights over Sabah, has been open to a settlement. But the squabbling heirs couldn't agree on how

to do it, says Parouk Hussin, Governor of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. Parouk says he was once asked by Malaysian officials to persuade the heirs to accept the setting up of a 'generously funded' foundation that would assist Muslim communities in Mindanao. No agreement was reached.

"...under the Aquino Government, Malaysia offered the sultanate at least US\$70 million (RM266 million) as settlement. But a politician who claimed to be one of the heirs protested, scuttling the talks.

"The region has since changed ...and in a borderless world that encourages economic integration among neighbours, 'Who really cares if Sabah belongs to us or Malaysia?'"

As the media battle heats up anew over the citizenship of the 13-year-old alleged rape victim that arose from the deportation saga, it becomes painfully apparent that the above do not represent the views of the mainstream media in the Philippines.

Rare copies of the magazine fight for store space amid popular gossip and movie titles, foreign publications and sensation-grabbing newspapers.

Speaking with the wife of a local businessman who both were recently in Kota Kinabalu, I was somewhat taken aback by her question: "Is there Press freedom in Malaysia?"

She was moved to ask after diligently reading Sabah newspapers from cover to cover. There were 95 per cent positive news and only five per cent negative ones, she pronounced. A very welcome change from what she would be reading back in the Philippines.

That's because the Philippine papers write the truth, her husband rather self-deprecatingly interjected. And Malaysian ones print lies, I quickly responded in kind, drowning a potentially contentious debate in all-round laughter!