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Girl who alleged rape back from Manila

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KOTA KINABALU, Mon. - The 13-year-old girl who was at the centre of a diplomatic row between the Philippines and Malaysia after she alleged she was raped by policemen at a detention centre returned from Manila today.

The girl, accompanied by Philippine Social Welfare Secretary Corazon Juliano Soliman and presidential adviser Nur Jaafar, arrived at the Kota Kinabalu International Airport at 5.15pm.

The girl and her escorts managed to elude photographers and television crew members who had been waiting for her at the airport since 4pm.

She was whisked away in a four-wheel-drive vehicle from the tarmac and taken to the Princess Anne Children's Home in Likas.

She arrived at the home at 5.50pm and was quickly taken to a room. Her head was covered with a cream-coloured jacket and she was wearing a blue pair of jeans.

Soliman, who arrived 10 minutes later, read out a "joint statement of commitment" on behalf of the Philippines and Malaysia to the Press.

The statement said the girl, nicknamed "Angelica", would be placed at the home to continue the healing process and would be provided with other services such as education.

"The Malaysian Government gives its utmost assurance to consider written requests for occasional visits to 'Angelica' by authorised officials of the Philippine Government.

"The Malaysian Attorney-General's Chambers shall supervise the investigation and prosecution of the alleged rape case. The Malaysian Government shall periodically inform the Philippine Government on the status and progress of the case.

"The Malaysian Government thanks the (Philippine) President (Gloria Macapagal Arroyo) and the Philippine Government for the excellent cooperation in the resolution of the case within the spirit of Asean solidarity.

"The Philippine Government likewise extends its gratitude to the Prime Minister (Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad) and the Malaysian Government for the positive resolution of the case," the statement said.

Taking questions from reporters, Soliman said the girl would also receive counselling at the home as part of the healing process.

"We believe this home is the best place for her. She needs a place where she can feel secure. She was staying at a place like this when she was in the Philippines."

He said the girl's parents were separated and that she had been living with her sisters and grandmother in Sabah.

On whether her parents would be allowed to meet her, Soliman said it would depend on the assessment of social workers in Sabah and after consultation with Philippine authorities.

Asked to confirm reports that the girl's father was a Malaysian and her mother a Filipina, Soliman said it was not a discussion point at present between both Governments.

To another question, Soliman said if necessary the girl would attend the trial of her alleged rape, subject to the assessment by social workers.

Soliman said she would meet National Unity and Social Development Minister Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman on Wednesday to discuss the issue.

Minister in the Chief Minister's Department Datuk Abdul Ghapur Salleh who "received" the girl said the alleged rape would be further

investigated.

He thanked the Philippine Government for bringing the girl back.

The girl was thought to be a Filipina until Malaysian police investigating the rape allegation discovered she was a Malaysian and that her parents were in Sabah.

She was detained in July when she was found wandering in the city without any identification documents and was sent to the detention centre in Menggatal where the alleged rape took place.

The girl did not resist when she was deported to Bongao, Tawi-Tawi, in the southern Philippines in early September.

In Bongao, the girl told Philippine authorities that she was repeatedly raped by police officers while awaiting deportation.

This prompted President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo to send a protest note to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Sept 4 demanding those responsible to be punished.

At the directive of Dr Mahathir, a high-level police team headed by Assistant Commissioner Takbir Ahmad was set up to investigate the girl's allegation.

The team interviewed several officers at the Menggatal detention centre and also went to Zamboanga to record a statement from the girl.

After she was identified to be a Malaysian, local police requested that the Philippine authorities send her back to Sabah to facilitate investigations.