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Keeping calm, sober in the face of irrational pressures

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WATCHING the current turbulence in our relations with Indonesia and the Philippines unfolding, I cannot help concluding that in any crisis, as in a war, the very first casualty, as they say, is always the truth.

The Philippine media, especially, have gone into overdrive doing what any media anywhere seem to do best if left entirely to their own devices - digging up unsavoury aspects of life.

Such footwork, given play in the context of very difficult economic conditions under which the vast majority of Indonesians and Filipinos live and targeted against a country and people generally perceived to be more well-to-do, is guaranteed to arouse raw passions.

This is not in any way to try to downplay or value less any unfortunate loss of lives in the process of repatriating people numbering in the tens of thousands.

But the fact of the matter is that people die everyday, even some babies, under normal circumstances. The deaths of a few apparently are not in dispute between Malaysian and Philippine authorities.

What is in dispute seems to be the Philippine insinuation that they happened as a result of ill-treatment by Malaysian handlers.

To their credit, all three Governments of Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines have come up remarkably sober and calm in the face of tremendous and somewhat irrational pressures imposed on them by popular anger fanned largely by irresponsible media and populist politicians forever stalking for the perfect issue or excuse to pounce on and gain popular points.

The Governments of both Indonesia and the Philippines have gone on record saying they do not want relations with Malaysia damaged.

The Government of Malaysia, while refusing to budge on the repatriation decision, is nevertheless to be commended for the efforts at transparency and accountability - agreeing to open up detention camps in Sabah for inspection by outsiders and promising to investigate any official complaints lodged of ill-treatment of the illegal immigrants.

As a result of the turbulence of the past several weeks, the old bogey of the Philippine claim to Sabah has been dredged up by some Filipino politicians. This is inevitable anytime our two countries hit a patch in relations as the claim has never been officially dropped by the Philippines.

Although quickly disowned by the Philippine President, an influential Senator, who happens to be a political associate of the Philippine President, seems keen to push this claim revival.

This, therefore, can be viewed as a subtle official pressure tactic on Malaysia.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and former Philippine President Fidel V. Ramos, being the pragmatic statesmen that they are, agreed to let the issue lay dormant as they pursued more productive co-operation, largely in the economic sphere.

Being the fractious democracy that the Philippines is, President Ramos - despite a record in office largely regarded as the best in recent Philippine history - failed to get his anointed successor elected as President. The path of economic co-operation between our two countries was severely tested under the abridged presidency of Joseph Estrada.

Fortunately for Malaysia, President Gloria Arroyo gives every indication

of following up on the enlightened policies of Ramos, starting with symbolically making Kuala Lumpur her first foreign destination upon assuming office.

But in order to pick up where Ramos left, she needs to consolidate her position in power first and hopefully gain reelection in 2004. Which is why I find it so puzzling that the Government does not seem to view it as in Malaysia's own best interests at least not to push so hard on the repatriation exercise at a particularly delicate political moment for President Arroyo.

A clear and realistic relook into official policy on human resources which takes into account the depressed employment prospects in the Philippines generally and Mindanao in particular and the manifest reliance of the Sabah economy on foreign labour is one fairly obvious avenue for economic co-operation.

Malaysia understandably refuses to countenance any proposal for "free" movement of people across borders. But a regulated flow is eminently in everyone's interests.

If the current flare-up in relations between Malaysia and the Philippines leads to a beefed-up and more humane bilateral agreement on sharing of human resources, all will not be in vain.

So much the better if the Philippine Government could also be persuaded to be more pro-active in facilitating Malaysian investments in Philippine projects - particularly within the context of the BIMP-EAGA sub-regional co-operation - so that Philippine labour can be more gainfully utilised within its own borders.

On our part, in spite of our initial disappointments with investments to help open up economically-depressed Mindanao, the policy to "prosper thy neighbour" seems to be intact.

What remains for us to do is to continually engage a receptive Philippine Government and impress on it the need to have an assuredly investorfriendly overall economic plan and come back to tell us how we can usefully contribute for mutual gain.

The current hiccup in relations with the Philippines over Filipinos in Sabah may be viewed as an inevitable if unfortunate purging of the messy results of a recent historical legacy which we would rather sooner put behind us.