

02/09/2002

Manila sends ex-congressman to KL for talks on deportation

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Former Tawi-Tawi congressman Nur Jaafar will lead a mission to Kuala Lumpur tomorrow as the Philippines' presidential adviser to discuss the recent deportation of Filipino illegal immigrants.

Philippine Ambassador to Malaysia Jose Brillantes said the delegation would include several key government officials representing Philippine President Gloria Arroyo.

The delegation also planned to visit Kota Kinabalu and Sandakan where a majority of Filipino illegal immigrants are detained following the end of the July 31 amnesty deadline.

The Government also introduced new penalties, including jail terms and whipping for illegal immigrants detained.

Nur will call on senior officials of the Home and Defence ministries to discuss ways to repatriate the Filipinos following the temporary suspension of their deportation.

The move came about after Arroyo consulted with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad two days ago, following Filipino media reports and public outcry over the alleged mistreatment of the detainees by Malaysian authorities.

Dr Mahathir denied the allegations and invited the Philippines to send their top officials to visit and inspect the detention centres.

As Home Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who is also Deputy Prime Minister, is away in South Africa, Nur's delegation is expected to call on Dr Mahathir.

In Kota Kinabalu, Federal Special Task Force (FSTF) head of deportation Assistant Commissioner Sidin Karim said Nur's delegation was bound for Kuala Lumpur.

(The Federal Special Task Force was set up in 1989 to deal with the large presence of illegal immigrants in Sabah.)

Sidin said of the 500 illegals housed at the temporary detention centre in Menggatal, about 320 were Filipinos.

"For the time being, we have stopped deporting Filipinos.

"We will allow the mission from Manila to check the situation (at detention centres) first," he said.

Philippine embassy second secretary Giovanni Palec is already in Sabah issuing travel documents to Filipinos returning home.

In Manila, Reuters reports that Arroyo will meet Congress members this week to seek a united stand on calls for Manila to revive its dormant territorial claim to Sabah.

Several lawmakers had demanded that the Philippines resurrect the claim after expressing outrage over alleged mistreatment by Malaysian authorities of deported Filipino illegal workers and their families.

"We need consultation on this. Even in Congress, the opinions are divided," presidential spokesman Ignacio Bunye said.

Yesterday, Arroyo appeared to distance herself from any immediate move to resurrect the territorial claim, saying the dispute "must be firmly delinked from the issue of deportees."

Meanwhile, AFP quoted Philippines Foreign Secretary Blas Ople as criticising politicians for stirring up calls to revive Manila's claim to Sabah.

"The emotional passions generated by the mass deportation crisis from Sabah, which some politicians are exacerbating to their own interest, are

again bringing to the fore the latent issues on Sabah," Ople told the Manila Bulletin today.