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Sabah-Ople

OPLE DEFENDS HANDLING OF MIGRANTS' ROW WITH KL

By: Al-Labita Jr

MANILA, Sept 1 (Bernama) -- The Philippines today defended its handling of the migrants' row with Malaysia, saying it is based on "calm and intelligent appreciation of the national interest".

"We should be credited for decisive action which has already brought notable improvements in the condition of the Filipino workers in Sabah," Foreign Secretary Blas Ople said.

He issued the statement after lawmakers and militant groups criticised him for his "poor handling" of the alleged cases of maltreatment by Malaysia of deportees from Sabah.

Ople noted that the Malaysian government had already acceded to President Gloria Arroyo's request for a moratorium on the arrest of illegal Filipino workers pending a joint review of the deportation procedures.

"President Arroyo's direct intervention has tapped a sympathetic vein at the highest levels in Malaysia due to the friendship between the two countries," he said.

"The moratorium granted by Prime Minister (Datuk Seri Dr) Mahathir Mohamad is a privilege granted only to the Filipino workers in Malaysia," he added.

Ople said he "does not espouse a gung-ho foreign policy that appeases the rabble in the streets but puts at risk the safety and welfare of the entire nation."

"Political bravado cannot substitute for an intelligent and workable foreign policy," he added.

He said that with the concurrence of Dr Mahathir, a team of Filipino doctors and health workers will be sent tomorrow to Kota Kinabalu to attend to the needs of the Filipino workers in Sabah.

The Philippine government is also sending an inter-agency team to confer with Malaysian officials on how to improve the deportation process.

Ople noted that conditions for the returning workers in the reception centres in Bongao, Tawi-Tawi, had markedly improved with the local governments pitching in with all possible assistance.

"Village leaders even cook for the deportees. This is an inspiring sight," he said. Ople described the overall Philippine-Malaysian bilateral relationship as resilient and strong.

Malaysia is a ranking Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) member and has been championing Philippine sovereignty and territorial integrity vis-a-vis separatists in Mindanao, he said.

It has also lent its good offices to forge a ceasefire agreement between the Philippine government and the secessionist Moro Islamic Liberation Front, the official noted.

"This is an important contribution to peace and order in southern Philippines," Ople said. He added that Malaysia also repatriated former rebel Nur Misuari to the Philippines to answer rebellion charges in court.

-- BERNAMA

LBJ AT AO