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PM orders thorough probe (HL)

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CYBERJAYA, Thurs. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has directed a "swift and thorough" investigation into an allegation that a Filipino teenager was molested while awaiting repatriation in a detention centre in Kota Kinabalu.

In a three-paragraph statement issued on the sidelines of the Multimedia Super Corridor's 6th International Advisory Panel meeting here, Dr Mahathir said:

"The Malaysian Government and I personally view with serious concern the allegations made by a Filipino minor Miss Jawina Song that she was a victim of sexual molestation in one of the detention centres in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.

"I have directed that swift and thorough investigations be conducted by the authority concerned.

"I would like to assure the Government and the people of the Philippines that appropriate action will be taken against those responsible in accordance with Malaysian laws."

Dr Mahathir was responding to a letter he received from Philippines President Gloria Arroyo-Macapagal, who expressed outrage over the alleged incident.

"I express my personal outrage and that of the Filipino people and which I am sure you will also condemn in the strongest terms," Arroyo had said in the letter.

Approached earlier by reporters at the end of the meeting, Dr Mahathir said if the incident actually took place, the culprit would face action.

Asked for his initial reaction upon receiving the letter, Dr Mahathir said: "I am very annoyed that this thing should happen at all. Our people should know that they cannot get away with this kind of thing. This is damaging for the nation and our image."

Meanwhile, Philippine presidential adviser Nur Jaafar admitted that Manila did not determine the authenticity of the allegation before making the formal protest to the Malaysian Government.

Speaking to reporters in Kota Kinabalu, Nur Jaafar, who is heading a delegation to Sabah to inspect the deportation centres, said the Philippine Government did not have the evidence to suggest that the incident actually happened.

"We are grateful to the Chief Minister of Sabah (Datuk Chong Kah Kiat) for having directed the police commissioner to investigate (the allegation) despite of the absence of evidence," Jaafar said.

Meanwhile, police have set up a team to investigate the alleged incident. State Police Commissioner Datuk Ramli Yusuff said the team is headed by Deputy Superintendent Hazani Ghazali from the State police headquarters serious crime division.

Describing the allegation as "very serious", he said Sabah police would leave no stone unturned in its investigation.

Police have sought the co-operation of the Philippine police through Interpol to bring the alleged sexual abuse victim here.

"We have been in contact with our Philippine counterparts to assist us in the investigation," he said.