

## Dec 1968 - The Sabah Dispute

The long-standing Philippine claim to the Malaysian territory of Sabah (formerly British North Borneo), which had remained dormant for several years, was revived during 1968, leading to a serious deterioration of relations between Malaysia and the Philippines. [The historical arguments on which the Philippines bases its claim to Sabah are set out in [18776 A.](#)]

Malaysian and Philippine officials met in Bangkok (Thailand) from June 17 to July 16 to discuss the Philippine claim to Sabah, the talks breaking down on the latter date after a number of meetings marked by acrimony and bitter exchanges. The chief Philippine delegate, Mr. Leon Guerrero, upheld the historical validity of his country's claim to Sabah and demanded that the dispute be referred to the International Court of Justice, whilst the chief Malaysian delegate, Tan Sri Ghazali Bin Shafie, maintained that the Philippine claim to Sabah was valid neither legally nor politically. The talks ended on July 16, as stated, with a walk-out by the Malaysian delegation, who said that there was “nothing more to talk about.”

Following the breakdown of the Bangkok talks, the Philippine Republic withdrew its Ambassador from Kuala Lumpur in protest against “Malaysia's intransigence and her abrupt rejection of the Philippine claim” to Sabah. The Ambassador's recall to Manila did not, however, involve the rupture of diplomatic relations, as the other members of the Philippine Embassy staff remained in Kuala Lumpur.

Relations between the two countries deteriorated still further when President Marcos of the Philippines signed on Sept. 18 a Bill—passed by the Philippine House of Representatives on Aug. 26—including Sabah within the national boundaries of the Philippine Republic. After an emergency meeting of the Malaysian Cabinet, Tunku Abdul Rahman (Prime Minister of Malaysia) issued a statement on Sept. 18 denouncing the Philippine legislation as “a violation of Malaysia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and, as such, a highly provocative act tantamount to aggression.” On the following day the Malaysian Government suspended diplomatic relations with the Philippines by recalling its Ambassador and members of the Embassy staff from Manila; at the same time Malaysia abrogated an anti-smuggling agreement between the two countries under which some Philippine Customs officers had been stationed in Sabah.

A mob of several hundred Philippine students, protesting at British support for Malaysia, broke on Sept. 27 into the compound of the British Embassy in Manila, set fire to the home of the butler's lodge in the Embassy grounds, smashed furniture, and tried to set fire to the Ambassador's car; the demonstrators did not succeed in breaking into the Embassy, however, and were eventually dispersed by riot police. The British Ambassador, Mr John Mansfield Addis, who was not in the Embassy at the time, received an apology from the Philippine Government.

An indication of a possible *rapprochement* between Malaysia and the Philippines came in a statement issued on Oct. 13 by Tun Abdul Razak, the Malaysian Deputy Premier, who said that

he would meet Mr. Narciso Ramos, the Philippine Foreign Secretary, in Tokyo some time after Oct. 22 “to examine the possibility of a summit meeting between President Marcos and Tunku Abdul Rahman.” Tun Abdul Razak explained that the invitation to such a meeting in Tokyo had been conveyed by Mr. Ramos to the Malaysian permanent representative at the United Nations during the current session of the U.N. General Assembly.

The prospects of a Malaysian-Philippine ministerial meeting in Tokyo, however, suffered a sharp setback as a result of an uncompromising speech in the U.N. General Assembly on Oct. 15 by Mr. Narciso Ramos. In this speech the Philippine Foreign Secretary reiterated the demand that the Sabah question should be referred to the International Court and said that his Government would accept the Court's judgment; until the question was settled, however, the Philippines could not recognize the authority of the Malaysian Government to represent the people and territory of Sabah.

Meanwhile the Malaysian Government, in a Note to Manila, had requested clarification of the status which the Philippine Government would accord to Tun Abdul Razak in the projected ministerial talks in Tokyo; it was made clear in Kuala Lumpur that the Malaysian Deputy Premier would not take part in these talks unless he was recognized as representing the whole of Malaysia, including Sabah. The Philippine Government, however, reiterated on Oct. 16 that it could not recognize the Malaysian Government's right to represent or speak for Sabah until a settlement of the dispute had been reached. As a result, the Malaysian Government decided not to take part in the proposed Tokyo talks, which were accordingly abandoned.

The removal of diplomatic status from all members of the Philippine Embassy staff in Kuala Lumpur was announced on Oct. 23 by Tunku Abdul Rahman, who said that the persons affected could remain in Malaysia if they wished as ordinary foreign citizens. On Nov. 19 it was announced in Manila that the Philippine Government had decided to withdraw its entire diplomatic staff from Kuala Lumpur—a move which, Mr. Ramos emphasized, did not mean the severance of diplomatic relations. As stated above, Malaysia had previously withdrawn her Embassy staff from Manila, except for a single official. (Times - Daily Telegraph - Guardian - New York Times - U.N. Information Centre, London) (**Prev. rep. Malaysian-Philippine relations, [21514](#) B; Philippine Claim to Sabah, [18779](#) A.**)