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Mokhtar-Gratitude

AHMAD MOKHTAR GRATEFUL TO BE FREE

By: R.Ravichandran

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 29 (Bernama) -- Malaysian ambassador to Peru Ahmad Mokhtar Selat, who was freed today by the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) after being held hostage for 12 days at the residence of the Japanese ambassador, was in high spirits.

"I am happy and grateful," he told Bernama when contacted at the Malaysian embassy at the Las Americas Hotel in Lima by telephone soon after his release.

He expressed appreciation for all the support and concern shown by the people of Malaysia especially Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"Their prayers and initiatives have led to my release and enabled me to be reunited with my family and friends," he said.

Ahmad Mokhtar also thanked the Peruvian government, especially President Alberto Fujimori, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) for their wisdom in dealing with the hostage crisis, leading to more than 400 of the 500 hostages being released.

Ahmad Mokhtar was among the 20 hostages released by the guerrillas at 5pm Peruvian time Saturday (6am Malaysian time today).

Relating his 12 days in captivity, Ahmad Mokhtar said the MRTA members treated him and the other hostages well and had told them that they would not be harmed as their purpose was only to secure the release of some 400 of their comrades held in Peruvian prisons.

"They treated me well, were very friendly and were not rough or threatening," he said.

In fact, he said, when he was released, the guerrillas especially their leader, known as Nestor Cerpa, shook hands with him and bade goodbye to him.

"One of the youngsters (a girl of about 16) told me to listen to some pop songs for her when I am out of there," he said.

Ahmad Mokhtar said that all 20 guerrillas wore masks when they seized the hostages but took them off after the first day.

The guerrillas had even asked him to teach them a few words of Bahasa Melayu like "terima kasih" and "selamat tinggal".

"They asked me a lot about Malaysia and they knew about our Proton Saga from the magazines they have read," he said.

Ahmad Mokhtar said the guerrillas had loaned them a transistor radio but they found it difficult to tune to stations like the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC).

The hostages were deprived of watching television because power supply had been cut off by the Peruvian authorities since Dec 17, the day the Japanese ambassador's residence was attacked during a reception in honour of the Japanese emperor's birthday.

Asked whether he was able to get any rest, Ahmad Mokhtar said: "There was more than enough time but I could hardly get any sleep."

He said he would be up and about at about 6am and retire at about 10pm and most of his waking hours were spent reading books or magazines and doing some exercises.

Ahmad Mokhtar said the hostages placed in each room chose a "monitor" who would fix the chores to be done like cleaning the room and the toilet and to dish out the food during meal times.

He said the "monitor" in his room was the secretary-general of Peru's

Labour Ministry.

Among his "roommates" were the ambassadors of Bolivia, the Dominican Republic, South Korea and Egypt, the consul-general of Argentina, and the secretary-general of Peru's Mining Ministry and its Foreign and Agriculture ministers.

Ahmad Mokhtar said he initially shared the room with a large number of people until some of them were released in stages and there were only about 30 people in it a few days before his release.

"Every day, the other hostages and I had to take turns to carry buckets of water and the mobile latrine to the room upstairs...this is really gotong-royong," he said.

He said he had to sleep on the floor for about four days before he was given a pillow and blanket.

"But that was nothing to me as I came from the kampung, not the city," said Ahmad Mokhtar who is from Kampung Pilah in Negeri Sembilan.

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On his feelings about the food supplied to the hostages, he said they had so much potatoes that he developed stomachache a few times.

They were also provided Japanese food, including rice which they had three times.

Ahmad Mokhtar said he felt sad when he left the remaining 80 hostages behind especially when they clapped and waved as they were leaving the residence.

"My hope is that they will also be leaving soon," he said.

Ahmad Mokhtar said that his wife, Jelial Ghalim, had informed members of their family back home of his release.

Asked whether the visit by Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who arrived in Lima on Thursday, had led to his release, Ahmad Mokhtar said he did not know what was discussed between Abdullah and the Peruvian officials but the MRTA guerrillas had told him of Abdullah's arrival.

Ahmad Mokhtar was freed about five hours after Abdullah's departure.

"But I feel that whatever discussions held were positive," he added.

Ahmad Mokhtar said the other hostages were also happy to know of Abdullah's arrival and had expressed their appreciation for the Malaysian government as they felt the visit was not only to expedite his release but also due to concern for the fate of all the hostages.

On arrangements being made by Wisma Putra for him to return to Malaysia for a rest, Ahmad Mokhtar said he hoped he could be back home next week.

He said he was in good health and underwent a medical check-up soon after his release. -- BERNAMA

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