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14 former Al-Arqam members released

S. Bala

TAIPING, Wed. - Fourteen former members of the banned Al-Arqam movement, held under the Internal Security Act at the Kamunting detention camp, were released today.

All except Ahmad Salim Omar, the former deputy director-general of the Land and Co-operative Development Ministry, were given conditional release and allowed to leave the camp about 1.05pm.

The others freed today were Tengku Noriah Tengku Abdullah, Azura Md Yusof, Nasiruddin Mohd Ali, Mohd Fakhruddin Arrazi Abdullah, Pahrol Mohamad Juoi, Hashim Ahmad Hashim Jaafar, Mohd Nizamuddin Asaari, Jaafar Ahmad, Hashim Mohamed, Dr Mansor Mohd Noor, Sheikh Abdul Rahman Sheikh Ahmad and Mohamad A. Bakar.

Mohd Nizamuddin is the son of former Al-Arqam leader Asaari Muhammad.

They were brought in a Prison Department bus to the camp entrance where their families and relatives had been waiting since this morning. All 14 were arrested separately after the National Fatwa Council ruled on Aug 5, 1994, that the Aurad Muhammadiyah teachings practised by the group deviated from Islam. The movement was banned on Aug 25, 1994.

A Home Ministry official, Raja Mohamad Raja Ismail told reporters that all except Ahmad Salim were given a week's leave to attend to family matters before reporting to the police stations specified in their release order.

He said they had to comply with certain conditions like getting clearance from the police if they wanted to leave their respective areas.

He added they had agreed not to engage in any propagation of the banned teachings.

A spokesman for the 14, Pahrol, thanked the Government for releasing them ahead of the Hari Raya celebrations.

"By doing so, we will be able to spend the joyous occasion with our families," he said, adding they had repented and vowed not to mislead the Muslims with the banned teachings.

Asked what were the immediate plans for the group, Pahrol hoped they would be able to assimilate into the mainstream society.

"Like everybody else, we hope to find jobs and look after our families," he said, adding they would undergo rehabilitation programmes and counselling.

Dr Mansor, 45, hoped to speak to former Al Arqam members on the misleading teachings and practices. "I have repented and I hope to return to the right path of Islam."

He praised the government for taking firm and strong measures to ensure the teachings did not spread further.

"In this context, I believe Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is also the Home Minister, police and the then Islamic Affairs Division of the Prime Minister's Department had acted swiftly before more damage could be done to Muslim unity," he said.

All 13 were put under restricted residence in Perak, Penang, Malacca, Pahang and Negri Sembilan.

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