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Ambassador-Return

AHMAD MOKHTAR RETURNS HOME AFTER LIMA ORDEAL

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 1 (Bernama) -- Malaysian ambassador Ahmad Mokhtar Selat, who was released last week after 11 days of captivity by Peruvian rebels in Lima, returned home today and vowed to go back to the Peruvian capital after a short rest to continue his duties.

"Yes, I will return to Lima," he told a packed news conference on his arrival at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah airport in Subang, near here.

The envoy's return starts the new year for Malaysia on a happy note.

Ahmad Mokhtar, accompanied by his wife, Jeliah Ghalim, daughter Melor Hidayah, Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Malaysian ambassador to Brazil Datuk Zainal Abidin Zain, arrived here at about 1pm after nearly 30 hours on board Malaysia Airlines' flight MH91 from Los Angeles.

About 100 well-wishers comprising relatives, friends and Wisma Putra officials thronged the VIP lounge at Terminal One of the airport to greet Ahmad Mokhtar.

Present were Acting Foreign Minister Datuk Abu Hassan Omar, Chief Secretary to the Government Datuk Abdul Halim Ali and Peruvian ambassador to Malaysia Jorge Bayona Medina.

Ahmad Mokhtar said the 11-day ordeal had robbed him of his freedom "but with the blessings from Allah, I am now a free man again".

"I cherish this freedom. I am really very happy to be back home after the 11-day ordeal," he said.

And to his colleagues in Wisma Putra, Ahmad Mokhtar said: "I hope they will not encounter this bad experience."

Ahmad Mokhtar was released at 5.30pm Peruvian time on Saturday (6.30am Malaysian time on Sunday) together with 19 others including Dominican Republic ambassador Jose Diaz.

He was among some 500 guests at the Japanese ambassador's residence to celebrate Emperor Akihito's 63rd birthday on Dec 17 when the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement rebels stormed the premises and took them hostage.

Ahmad Mokhtar regarded the incident as "a challenge or a risk which Wisma Putra officers have to face when stationed overseas."

"The social and political system (in other countries) is different...we have to perform our duty for the sake of the country," he added.

He hoped to meet his relatives waiting for him in his hometown as soon as possible.

He said he had kept an account of his ordeal in his diary and might write a book on it.

Jeliah, when asked on her feelings after the ordeal said: "My heart is only half here (Kuala Lumpur), and half is still in Lima as there are more than 80 people there (still not released). I don't really feel hundred per cent free, as half of my heart is still there with them."

She said she managed to stay calm while waiting for her husband's release with the support and prayers of everyone, including the families of those taken hostage with him.

"I take it as test from God to test my faith," she added.

Melor said she was happy to be home and that her father had been released "but I am also hoping that the rest (hostages) will be released soon."

Meanwhie, Abdulah told reporters that he, Ahmad Mokhtar and Zainal Abidin had handed Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's letter of

thanks and appreciation to Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori.

"I told Fujimori that the prime minister and the people of Malaysia were thankful and appreciated his efforts in securing Ahmad Mokhtar's release," he said.

He said the incident served as a lesson in that, for example, the good relations between Malaysia and Peru had helped resolve certain problems in times of need. -- BERNAMA

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