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Envoy to Peru back home for well-earned rest

Chok Suat Ling; Shareem Amry

PETALING JAYA, Wed. - After 12 days of being held captive by Marxist rebels in a hostage-taking drama watched by the world, Malaysia's Ambassador to Peru Ahmad Mokhtar Selat returned home today with his family for a well-earned rest.

Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who accompanied Ahmad Mokhtar on the flight home, said the envoy would be submitting a report on the situation to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad "as soon as possible".

Also accompanying Ahmad Mokhtar on the flight were his wife Jeliah Ghalim, daughter Melor Hidayah, Malaysian Ambassador to Brazil Datuk Zainal Abidin Zain and special assistant to the Foreign Minister Mohd Radzi Abdul Rahman.

Their flight touched down at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah International Airport in Subang at 1pm.

Abdullah said: "We will be holding discussions with Ahmad Mokhtar. There is much we can learn from his report."

He said one of the lessons learnt was how important it was to forge strong bilateral ties with another country.

"Both the Malaysian and Peruvian governments combined their efforts to help secure Ahmad Mokhtar's release.

"Our good relationship with Peru and Dr Mahathir's friendship with Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori were the factors which helped fuel the efforts from both sides to secure the release of Ahmad Mokhtar."

Abdullah also said the security in Malaysian embassies in certain countries would be tightened following the episode.

"This is especially so in countries where there may be factors capable of threatening the safety of our embassy staff.

"There is no need to hire personal bodyguards for all embassy staff, however.

"We will act depending on the situation. If the situation demands tighter security, we will act accordingly."

He said the Government would not be revamping any of its procedures in assigning diplomats to Latin-American countries.

"We will continue forging close ties with these countries. Nothing has changed."

Abdullah thanked those who have helped during the trying days when Ahmad Mokhtar was held hostage.

"This include all those who have prayed for his safe and speedy release.

"I have also conveyed Dr Mahathir's gratitude to the Peruvian Government.

"Dr Mahathir conveyed it in a letter which I handed over to Fujimori."

Abdullah also thanked the staff in the Malaysian embassy in Peru, which was headed by Zainal during the crisis.

Ahmad Mokhtar, who looked refreshed despite his recent ordeal and the 30-hour-long flight, said he was glad to be back on home soil and thanked the Government, especially Dr Mahathir and Abdullah, for working towards securing his release.

"I would also like to thank Malaysians who prayed for us.

"My wife received many calls and letters by fax and cable from people here who lent their moral support."

In thanking his colleagues at Wisma Putra, he said: "I hope this will

never happen to my friends, but this is a risk that all diplomats must face."

On how many days he would be in Malaysia, Ahmad Mokhtar said he had been instructed to return for a rest, but had not been given a time frame to go back to Lima.

When asked to confirm if he would be returning to Lima as ambassador, he said "Yes".

Ahmad Mokhtar declined to speculate on how the rebels had chosen the lucky ones to be released among all the foreign diplomats:

"I could not read their minds. I was always optimistic and believed I would be released, but I just didn't know when."

Jeliah and Melor, 16, stayed close to Ahmad Mokhtar at the airport, greeting the swarm of relatives who turned up to wish them well.

The couple's two sons, Sharir Afandy, 21, and Rizal Afandy, 19, are still in the United States.

Among those on hand to welcome them were the Chief Secretary to the Government Datuk Abdul Halim Ali, Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister Datuk Abu Hassan Omar and the Foreign Ministry's secretary-general Datuk Kadir Mohamad.

Ahmad Mokhtar was among some 500 guests at a reception held at the Japanese Ambassador's residence in the Peruvian capital when the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Front guerillas stormed the place in a spectacular raid on Dec 17.

He was freed along with 20 others after 12 days of being held hostage.

There are still 81 hostages in the residence as the standoff between the rebels and the Peruvian Government enters its 16th day.

Melor said she hoped the remaining hostages would be released soon.

"I feel that a part of me is still with them because my father was in there too."

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