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Abu Bakar-Timor

M'SIAN GENERAL APPOINTED UN DEPUTY COMMANDER IN EAST TIMOR

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 17 (Bernama) -- A Malaysian army general has been appointed the Deputy Commander of the United Nations (UN) multinational force that will be deployed in East Timor to restore law and order.

Defence Minister Datuk Abang Abu Bakar Mustapha said today the Brigadier-General will also be heading an initial Malaysian complement of 16 officers and 13 other ranks to the multinational force.

Speaking to reporters here, the minister said UN secretary-general Kofi Annan informed Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in a telephone call yesterday afternoon of the appointment.

Dr Mahathir, who was in the Federal Territory of Labuan yesterday for a one-day visit, agreed to the appointment, said Abang Abu Bakar who however did not disclose the name of the brigadier-general.

Chief of Defence Forces Gen Tan Sri Mohamed Zahidi Zainuddin later described the brigadier general as having experience working with UN military operations and Indonesian forces.

Defence Ministry officials a Royal Malaysian Air Force Hercules C-130 aircraft would ferry the Malaysian component of the Multinational Force (MNF) to Dili over the weekend.

Malaysia had in the past decade actively deployed her troops for UN peacekeeping and peace enforcement missions in Namibia, Cambodia, Somalia and the Balkans, among others.

Although there had been no official figures yet, there were Malaysian casualties in such overseas deployments, which at times involved up to 2,000 troops.

In Somalia, for example Malaysian troops fought alongside US forces during the infamous Bakhara Market battle in the ruined capital city of Mogadishu.

The highest ranking Malaysia officer appointed to top command position in earlier UN missions was Lieutenant-General Datuk Aboo Samah Aboo Bakar, who commanded UN Operations in Somalia (UNOSOM) in the early 90s.

Abang Abu Bakar said Malaysia would be taking part "in a big way" in the UN peacekeeping force six weeks after the deployment of the MNF force in East Timor but he did not disclose the size of the Malaysian contingent to be deployed.

Malaysia had already contributed 60 military observers and civilian policemen to the first UN mission in East Timor (Unamet) prior to last Aug 30 referendum.

The MNF, according to UN jargon, is phase II of the UN operation in the strife-torn territory which was abruptly abandoned by its colonial ruler Portugal in 1975 before Indonesia annexed East Timor.

Defence and foreign ministries' sources said under Phase III -- the Peacekeeping operation (PKO) -- the UN secretary general had said that he would consider giving Malaysia the post of commander of the PKO.

Amongst the 10 Asean member countries, the Philippines and Thailand had made commitments to also send troops for PKO phase.

The sources also said the UN secretary-general regretted that he came to the Asean group "a bit late" but assured their ambassadors that "it was not an afterthought.

Asean groups Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

"Annan informed us that he had to accept Australia's offer since they

were willing and able to response immediately as the situation there was evolving very fast and required urgent action," the sources said.

Australia will be leading the 8,000-strong multinational force to East Timor to restore law and order after rampaging pro-Jakarta militias killed thousands, according to news reports, following a vote for independence from Indonesia last month.

Reports from Jakarta today said the Australian commander of the UN force, Major-General Peter Cosgrove is expected to arrive in the territory tomorrow.

-- BERNAMA

MGM RYN