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Malaysian officer is deputy commander of UN force

Sager Ahmad; Suhaiza Abu Bakar

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - A Malaysian brigadier-general has been appointed the deputy commander of an 8,000-strong United Nations multi-national force to troubled East Timor.

He will head an initial 30-man Malaysian armed forces team comprising 16 other officers and 13 soldiers of other ranks to East Timor under the MNF which will be led by Australia's Major-General Peter Cosgrove.

Announcing this at a Press conference in Wisma Pertahanan today, Defence Minister Datuk Abang Abu Bakar Mustapha said UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan had telephoned Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday to inform him of the appointment.

Dr Mahathir was on a day-long visit to Labuan.

Although Abang Abu Bakar did not name the officer, the New Straits Times has learnt he is Brig-Jen Datuk Mohd Khalid Saad, who is the commander of the Army First Division's Fifth Infantry Brigade, based in Lok Kawi, Sabah.

Abang Abu Bakar said Malaysia would play an "important role" in the MNF, six weeks after its deployment but did not disclose the size of the Malaysian contingent.

It is learnt a Royal Malaysian Air Force Hercules C-130 transport aircraft will fly the initial Malaysian force to Darwin, Australia, on Sunday, where they will attend a briefing before leaving for the East Timor capital of Dili.

The Malaysian armed forces have repeatedly distinguished themselves in various UN and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation-led peacekeeping forces and gained a worldwide reputation as an efficient force. Among the countries where Malaysian forces have served under the UN and Nato umbrella are Namibia, Cambodia, Somalia and the Balkans.

Amongst the 10 Asean member countries, the Philippines and Thailand have made commitments to send troops for the MNF.

Earlier, Abang Abu Bakar received RM150,000 in sponsorship for the coming Armed Forces Tattoo '99 at the National Sports Complex in Bukit Jalil and the F1 racing circuit in Sepang next month.

Among the sponsors were the Armed Forces Superannuation Fund (LTAT), Perwira Affin Bank, Star-LRT, Takaful Nasional, F&N, British Aerospace, Pernama and Pakaian Saling Erti.

He also received two schoolbuses worth RM500,000, from LTAT chairman Jen (Rtd) Tan Sri Ghazali Che Mat, donated jointly by LTAT and Bousted Holdings Bhd to transport children of armed forces members to school.

Meanwhile in Kota Baru, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said today the soldiers would be the first phase of Malaysia's involvement in East Timor before a second batch was sent.

He said the team would use an appropriate approach to return self-confidence to the East Timorese.

He was speaking to reporters after opening the Kampung Lubuk Lesong bridge at Hutan Pasir, Ketereh.

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