

02/10/1999

`The army is ready for East Timor duty under UN'

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - The Army is ever willing to lend support to the proposal by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for Asean countries to play a bigger role in the International Force in East Timor (Interfet).

Newly-appointed Army deputy chief, Lt Jen Datuk Abdul Aziz Hassan, said today that various elements of the Army, including the infantry and mechanised outfits, were being prepared in view of the expected deployment in Dili, capital of the ravaged island.

"Troops from Asean countries can assimilate better in East Timor as they share many similarities with Indonesia's culture.

"We are just awaiting the `green light' from the United Nations for deployment there," he told newsmen after handing over his duty as the Army's Field Command chief to his successor, Lt Jen Datuk Zaini Mohamad Said, at the command headquarters at the Sungai Besi Camp.

To date, Malaysia has deployed 76 policemen and soldiers under Phase One, as observers of the UN Assessment Mission in East Timor.

This was followed by Phase Two which involved the deployment of 30 soldiers led by the Army First Division's Fifth Infantry Brigade commander, Brig Jen Datuk Mohd Khalid Saad, who left for East Timor on Sept 20, on a fact-finding mission.

Phase Three involves between 800 and 1,500 peacekeepers under the Malaysian Contingent which is expected to be deployed next month.

Yesterday, Dr Mahathir had told newsmen covering the 54th United Nations General Assembly in New York that Asean should take the lead in peacekeeping duties in East Timor, instead of Australia which appeared to have a heavy-handed approach in leading Interfet.

He felt that Australia should scale down the size of its forces and be less belligerent in the way it was going about securing peace and disarming the militias in East Timor.

Following the Aug 30 UN referendum, Australia is leading an 8,000-strong Interfet - commanded by Australian Major-General Peter Cosgrove - from more than 20 countries.

The countries include Brunei, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines and the United States.

(END)