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Mahathir-Timor

THAILAND TO HOLD NUMBER TWO POST OF UN FORCE IN EAST TIMOR, SAYS PM

TUARAN, Sept 18 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today a Malaysian brigadier-general will not take up the post of deputy commander of the United Nations (UN) multinational force in East Timor as reported yesterday.

The prime minister said the number two slot had actually been given to Thailand.

Speaking at a news conference before leaving for Kuala Lumpur, Dr Mahathir said this was confirmed to him by UN secretary-general Kofi Annan.

The prime minister was disputing a statement by Defence Minister Datuk Abang Abu Bakar Mustapha yesterday that a Malaysian brigadier-general has been appointed the deputy commander of the multinational force that will be deployed in East Timor to restore law and order.

Abu Bakar was also quoted as saying that the brigadier-general will also be heading an initial Malaysian complement of 16 officers and 13 other ranks to the multinational force.

Dr Mahathir however said Malaysia would send the initial team to East Timor.

He said "there is no point in quarelling about who is appointed to the position (as deputy commander)."

"Afterall the UN force has not been set up yet," Dr Mahathir said, adding what was important was for the peacekeepers to do what they were mandated to do.

The prime minister stressed that Malaysia supports the presence of a peacekeeping force in East Timor.

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 Dili, the capital of East Timor said the Australian commander of the UN force, Maj-Gen Peter Cosgrove was expected to arrive in the territory tomorrow.

Thailand is contributing a force of 1,500, including 1,000 infantry, 50 medics and technicians, and personnel from the airforce and navy. It will also supply one C-130 transport plane and three naval vessels.

The Thais will be led by Maj-Gen Songkitti Chakkabatr, director of the army's information division and former Thai military attache to Indonesia, who is to act as deputy commander of the Australian-led peacekeeping force.

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