

'KL did not take unilateral action to free hostages

28

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MALAYSIA did not engage in any unilateral action to free the 21 hostages held by an armed group on the southern Philippine island of Jolo.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday denied that Malaysia had attempted to do things unilaterally by sending Malaysian Ambassador to the Philippines Mohamed Arshad M. Husain to negotiate with the kidnapers.

Whatever action was taken by Malaysia, he said, was done with the consent of the Philippine Government.

"We are concerned because these are hostages taken from Malaysian territory and they also include Malaysians.

"So, we have the right to be concerned," he told reporters after opening the Third Asia-Africa Forum yesterday.

The victims, nine Malaysians and 12 foreign nationals, were kidnapped by the armed group from Sipadan island in Sabah on April 23.

Dr Mahathir said this when asked to comment on news reports that Philippine Government chief negotiator Robert Aventajado had expressed unhappiness at Mohamed Arshad's action.

Reuters reports: Declaring they wanted peace, about 100 Muslim rebels emerged from their mountain lair in the southern Philippines for talks yesterday in Jolo, Philippines, and a negotiator said there was a 50-50 chance they might soon free an ailing German woman among their captives.

The unexpected meeting between the Abu Sayyaf (Father of the Sword) guerrillas and Muslim provincial Governor Abdusakur Tan in a local town hall revived hopes of a breakthrough in the stalled negotiations for the release of the hostages.

"Let's talk about peace," a grinning rebel leader Galib Andang — also called Commander Robot — told journalists before he entered the town hall, brandishing an assault rifle, to meet Tan.

The Governor and the rebel embraced and kissed as they met in the Patikul hills 13km from the Jolo town centre. Another Abu Sayyaf leader, Mujib Susukan, his long hair tied into a pony tail, joined them in a room for talks.

The two guerrillas were escorted into the hall by 10 other rebels wearing black ski masks.

"We are nearer to resolving this matter," Tan said, adding the priority was to obtain the release of German housewife Renate Wallert, reportedly suffering from hypertension.

Asked how he rated the chances of Wallert being freed this week, Tan said: "Fifty-fifty."

He said the rebels reiterated their demand for an Islamic state in the south of the mostly Catholic nation — a demand consistently rejected by Manila.