

# 'Don't side-track hostage issue'

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14 JUN 2000

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EFFORTS to release 21 hostages including nine Malaysians in Jolo, an island at the southern tip of the Philippines, should not be side-tracked, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

"We will listen to claims but will not entertain those other than the original aim of releasing the hostages," he told newsmen in Subang yesterday.

Dr Mahathir was asked to comment on a news report yesterday which quoted Malaysian Ambassador to the Philippine Mohamad Arshad Manzoor Hussain as

saying that the Philippines Immigration chief Rufus Rodriguez supported the kidnappers' request that Kuala Lumpur investigate human rights violations against the 500,000-strong Filipino population in Sabah.

This, according to Mohamad Arshad, contravened Manila's stand which already opposed to the rebels' demand.

"There are pros and cons to the suggestion. There are also some people who want to take the advantage of the situation for domestic political reason," he said.

On whether Malaysia will submit new proposals for the release of the hostages to the Philippines Government, Dr Mahathir said the Government has yet to receive a clear indication of the kidnappers' demands.

"We want to know the actual situation and the demands of the kidnappers. Currently, we do not know what they want. We want to know. Some say that they want money but we fear the Philippines Government will not approve to this.

"This is an unusual case... like somebody pointing a gun at us and want us to

make the decision immediately. This is very difficult," he said.

Later, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said he will leave for Manila today to secure actual information on the hostage drama.

On Rodriguez's remarks, he said the Philippines immigration chief should not dictate what Malaysia should do.

"Our concern is specifically the welfare and safety of the hostages. The negotiators should focus on this rather than discussing irrelevant issues," he said.