

'Aid projects being considered' 19

JOLO, Mon: Finland and Malaysia are considering aid projects in the southern Philippines to coax extremists to free more than a dozen hostages held for over three months, officials said today.

Chief hostage negotiator, Roberto Aventajado, said Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had tapped two senior officials to meet with him to firm up an aid package for areas controlled by the Abu Sayyaf in southern Jo10 island.

Aventajado said he was expected to discuss with former Sabah chief minister Yong Teck Lee and Malaysian Deputy Education Minister

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~~Datu Abdul Azziz Hassanudin~~
"livelihood" projects.

These could include setting up of mango, coffee and orange plantations in Talipao town, where the 17 hostages are being held in a jungle lair.

The Malaysian envoys were originally set to arrive today, but failed to secure landing rights from aviation officials in Zamboanga city, where Aventajado's aides were waiting, sources close to the negotiations said.

Aventajado earlier said he called Dr Mahathir yesterday after Abu Sayyaf gunmen delayed the scheduled release of three Malaysians.

~~Dr Mahathir then ordered~~
his envoys to fly to Zamboanga, he said.

Finland has also expressed interest in financing similar "livelihood" projects, but said it would only do so if asked by the Philippine Government, according to a report in the daily Hensingin Samonat in Helsinki.

"The main thing is to secure the release of the hostages," the paper quoted Finnish Foreign Minister Erkki Tuomioja as saying. "If we can find acceptable ways to contribute to that end, all governments would obviously be willing to consider them."

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