

Dr Mahathir: Manila urged to ensure hostages' safety in army operations

Nst 2,0 SEP 2000

KOTA KINABALU, Tues. — Malaysia wants Manila to ensure the three Malaysians held hostage by the Abu Sayyaf are not endangered in the military operations against the rebels.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Malaysia had conveyed to the Philippines its concern about the safety of the hostages following the military assault on the rebels' hideout.

"Our officials are in communication (with the Philippines) and we know what they are doing and why they are doing it," he told a Press conference after a meeting with Sabah Cabinet Ministers.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia could not interfere with the decision of the Philippine Government to launch the assault.

"But, of course, we would like them to try and ensure that our people are not hurt in the process."

Asked if the military operation was a suitable action, he said as far as Malaysia was concerned anything that endangered the lives of Malaysians was unacceptable.

Asked if Manila had assured Malaysia of the safety of the hostages, Dr Mahathir said the Defence Ministry was in communication with Manila on the matter.

On measures to prevent intrusion into Malaysian waters, he said plans were afoot to heighten security along the Malaysia-Philippine border.

"Anybody crossing the border is invading the country and we will take action befitting such an action ... we will make sure they will not cross our border, whether it is a sea or land border," he said.

Dr Mahathir said Peninsular Malaysia was also facing the same problem with Indonesian illegal immigrants. The Sabah problem

was more complicated because the Filipino illegals carried weapons.

On efforts to deal with the large number of illegal immigrants in Sabah, Dr Mahathir said the Government was determined to tackle the problem.

"We have been very tolerant . . . they use our facilities such as schools, hospitals and other amenities and yet we are being accused of ill-treating them. No other country allows illegals to make use of its facilities."

On allegations that large amounts of money belonging to Perwaja Steel had been stashed away in Swiss banks, he said investigations were ongoing.

He added there were some Malaysians who knew about the case but were abroad, making it difficult for the authorities to meet them.

Dr Mahathir later returned to Kuala Lumpur.