

No ransom paid to Abu Sayyaf, says Mahathir

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PUTRAJAYA. Sat: Malaysia did not pay any ransom to the armed abductors in Jolo, southern Philippines, to free the Malaysian hostages.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in denying foreign reports on the matter, said that the government is not involved in any payment of ransom to the Abu Sayyaf, which abducted 21 mostly foreign tourists from Sipadan island off Sabah on April

23. Mahathir also called for the speedy release of the remaining three Malaysian hostages.

Nine Malaysians were among those abducted, but six were released after ransom money, believed to be around US\$3 million (RM11.4 million), was paid.

Asked about the possibility that some private bodies had paid the ransom money, Mahathir said: "Anything is possible. We do not have any power to stop others from paying."

To another question, the Prime Min-

ister said he did not know why the Abu Sayyaf released the Malaysian hostages before the others.

On allegations that the rebels released the hostages because the Malaysian government had made a commitment to help develop southern Philippines, he said: "I don't know if that is the reason.

"Maybe, somebody has made a commitment, but we have always been keen to help develop southern Philippines.

"In fact, we are already doing so by investing and helping them create job opportunities."