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33 Filipinos held off Sabah

Adrian David; Patrick Sennyah

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - The Armed Forces yesterday detained 33 Filipinos who attempted to enter the country without valid travel documents, following the offensive by the Philippines security forces against Abu Sayyaf rebels in and around Jolo.

Armed Forces chief Jen Tan Sri Mohamad Zahidi Zainuddin said today, the 33, who had arrived by boat, were detained at Kaningan off the east coast of Sabah late yesterday evening.

Following their detention, he said the armed forces stepped up its surveillance before Royal Malaysian Navy patrol vessels chased away about 50 other Filipinos who attempted to get to Sabah from the southern Philippines.

"We are having a trying time in preventing any illegal entry into mainland Sabah and islands off its coast, due to their proximity with the Philippines."

"All it takes is about 15 minutes or so, for foreigners to hop by boat from one island (in the Philippines) to another Malaysian island (off Sabah)," Mohamad Zahidi told newsmen after hosting injured servicemen and their families to high-tea at his official residence, Wisma Perkasa, in Jalan Bellamy.

Although he did not deny the Filipinos could be war refugees, he said the Armed Forces had to take a firm stand in order to protect Malaysia's sovereignty and discourage them from entering the country.

"Otherwise, there will be a flood of (war) refugees into country," he said, adding that the Government was studying the prospect of converting one of the least inhabited islands off Sabah into a refugee camp just like Pulau Bidong which housed Vietnamese boat refugees.

Mohamad Zahidi added that the Royal Malaysian Air Force provided vital information via its maritime patrol aircraft, upon seeing foreign vessels encroaching on Malaysian waters, thus enabling the authorities to take deterrent action.

Based on the information, RMN patrol and marine vessels were able to prevent illegal entry of foreigners into the country, he said.

Mohamad Zahidi said the Armed Forces had deployed more soldiers, on another two islands off the east coast of Sabah, bringing to 10 the total number of islands being occupied.

"At the same time, more RMAF aircraft and RMN vessels have been deployed to offer round-the-clock surveillance in the affected region."

The RMAF has deployed additional Hercules PC-130 maritime aeroplanes and Sikorsky S-61 Nuri helicopters, while the RMN has despatched more patrol vessels from its Fleet Operations Command in Lumut, to Sabah.

The mothership, KD Inderapura, is providing command and control services to RMN CB 90 patrol vessels.

"We have also put in an urgent request to the Government to acquire 12 more fast boats for the RMN," added Mohamad Zahidi.

Meanwhile, a spokesman from the office of the United Nations Human Rights Commissioner in Geneva said a war refugee as defined in the Geneva Convention 1951, was "a refugee outside his/her country of nationality or habitual residence, having a well-founded fear of his/her race or religion, nationality or a membership of a social group and is unable or unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country".

Yesterday, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had said that

Filipinos entering Malaysia to escape attacks by military forces will be treated as war refugees.

(END)