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Assurance by Estrada (HL)

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Philippine President Joseph Estrada has promised a visiting Malaysian delegation that his troops will not step up military action to free hostages held by rebels, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

"President Estrada gave an assurance they will give their best and won't intensify their military action," he said at a press conference after chairing an Umno supreme council meeting.

Malaysia and other governments whose nationals are being held by Abu Sayyaf rebels are urging negotiations rather than force to free the 21 captives on Jolo island in the southern Philippines.

Nine Malaysians were among the hostages seized from Pulau Sipadan by Abu Sayyaf guerillas on April 23 and taken by boat to the southern Philippines.

There are also three Germans, two French, two South Africans, two Finns, one Lebanese and two Filipinos.

Following the abduction, Kuala Lumpur had despatched a delegation comprising, among others, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Pandikar Amin Mulia and Deputy Defence Minister Datuk Shafie Apdal who left for Manila on Tuesday to help in efforts to secure their release.

Earlier today, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi urged the Philippines to avoid using force to free the hostages, a view that was shared by several other countries, including Germany, Finland and France.

Abdullah said Malaysia always preferred negotiations because using the military could sometimes lead to situations that could not be controlled.

"I hope that our Minister and Deputy Minister can put forward our views on the hostage issue.

"But we want to co-operate and do not want to obstruct or cause hardship as we know the Philippines is facing pressure in handling the issue," he told a Press conference here after launching two books.

In Jolo, Philippine officials said the rebels had split their hostages into small groups and were repeatedly trying to break through a cordon of troops around their jungle hideout.

The Abu Sayyaf rebels divided the hostages into five groups and each was trying to escape separately, leading to intermittent exchanges of fire, Defence Secretary Orlando Mercado told reporters.

But he said all 21 hostages were alive and still captive, discounting radio reports two may have escaped or that some may have died in fighting around the rebel stronghold on Jolo island.

The Philippines had initially said it was committed to negotiations but would not rule out the possibility of using force.

Estrada told German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder in a telephone call yesterday that the safety of the hostages would remain a top priority.

"We are relying on the assurances of the Philippine Government that force will not be used," German Government spokesman Uwe-Karsten Heye said.

"Violence would be fraught with risks for the hostages. That is not acceptable to us."

Finland called on Tuesday for a safe end to the hostage crisis.

"Finland is confident that the Government of the Philippines endeavours to solve the hostage crisis in a way that does not put the safety of the

hostages in jeopardy," Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen wrote in a message to Estrada.

Last week, France urged the Philippines to exercise extreme caution in trying to free them.

"We have cautioned these authorities against the temptation to rescue the hostages by force in a manner which might compromise their security," Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Anne Gazeau-Secret said.

Pandikar said Estrada had assured him in a meeting in Manila yesterday that the Government would take into account the views of the foreign nations.

"No time-frame as to when the problem can be resolved was given but the assurance given was that the Philippine Government will consider the views of every nation involved," Bernama quoted him as saying.

Meanwhile, at least two hostages were wounded during a five-hour gunbattle between government troops and rebels on Tuesday night, according to the chief negotiator seeking their release.

This morning, a local Philippine radio station reported that two white men among the hostages had escaped yesterday from their captors.

But Mercado said he could not immediately confirm the report.

In another development, the negotiator, Nur Misuari, attempting to secure the release of the hostages on Jolo island threatened to quit today unless the military lifted its siege of the militants holding them.

Misuari, a former rebel leader appointed as an intermediary by the Philippine Government, told local television that he would stop trying to negotiate the release of the hostages if the Government did not stop military operations in the Talipao area of Jolo island where the captives are being held.

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