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`It's better to be patient than rush things to get hostages freed'

KOTA KINABALU, Fri. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said it would be better to be patient in seeking the release of three more Malaysians still being held captive by armed rebels in southern Philippines.

"We (the Government) have to handle this gently. We do not want to upset people. We do not want to hurt our own people or for that matter all the other hostages."

He said rushing things in this matter would only cause problems.

Asked whether he was frustrated that it was taking too long to arrange the release of the hostages, he said:

"Well, I am in a way. But we have done our best. We have tried to contact them (the armed rebels). We have tried to persuade them to release the hostages.

"We should be grateful quite a number of our people have been freed. I think there should be a peaceful end to it. I asked the hostages last night and they told me they were not badly treated, not tortured. They only suffered from diarrhoea because of food."

Last night Dr Mahathir met the six Malaysians freed from captivity in Jolo Island after being abducted at gunpoint from Pulau Sipadan on April 23.

They are policeman Abdul Jawah Salawat, Wildlife Department rangers Francis Masangkim, Zulkarnain Hashim and Baln Krishnan Nair, dive master Vincent Kong and cook Lee Hock Leong.

The three still held by the armed rebels are Wildlife Department ranger Basilius Jim, divemaster Fong Yin Ken and cook Kua Yu Loong.

Dr Mahathir said the hostages were not treated like the hostages taken by the Al-Ma'unah group in Perak.

On measures taken by the Government to prevent another Sauk incident, he said security nationwide had been stepped up.

He said the Government was doing everything possible but sometimes these things (armed kidnapping) happened.

On Islamic militancy in this region, the Prime Minister said it was much more than before.

"We had expected people in the region not to be drawn to such futile activities but apparently in some cases they are so frustrated and in other cases they are so misled, worked up by hatred like in the case of Al-Ma'unah," he said.

On the rotation system of the Sabah Chief Minister's post, he said it was up to the people of Sabah and the State BN.

Dr Mahathir said it was true he suggested and started the system in 1994 but there was no opposition to it then as everybody obviously accepted it.

"Now if I say `stop', the people may protest. The final decision lies with the people. As far as I am concerned, I am prepared to listen to the wishes of the people of Sabah."

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