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`Coincidental freed hostages are Muslims'

Letitia Samuel; Raynore Mering

KUCHING, Sat. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today that it was coincidental that the two hostages released so far by rebels in Jolo, Philippines, were Muslims.

"Coincidentally, the two (Malaysian hostages) released are Muslims. But I hope it is not done based on religion," the Prime Minister told reporters when asked whether the release of Abdul Jawan Salawat yesterday and Zulkarnain Hashim three weeks ago was because they were Muslims.

The Prime Minister was speaking after chairing the State Barisan Nasional meeting here today. He is on a three-day visit to Kuching.

Dr Mahathir said he was not aware whether the kidnappers released the policeman because he was a Muslim.

Abdul Jawan from Sabah was among 20 hostages being held captive for more than 80 days by rebels in Jolo.

Abdul Jawan and Zulkarnain were among 21 hostages taken captive from Pulau Sipadan on April 23.

The others still being held captive are seven Malaysians, three Germans, two French, two Finns, two South Africans, two Filipinos and a Lebanese.

Meanwhile, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said in Kuala Lumpur that the religion of the hostages released so far was immaterial.

"Whatever the reasons, we want all hostages freed. We are not concerned with who they release, we just want all the hostages released, and we hope it will be soon."

Speaking to reporters after flagging off participants in the Malaysian Franchise Rally at Stadium Melawati, he said there was no need to delve into the matter.

He said Malaysia was happy that another Pulau Sipadan hostage had been released, adding that this raised hopes that all captives would be freed soon.

He added the Government and families of the abducted men had been waiting long for their return.

"We thank God and hope the others will also be released soon."

He thanked the parties instrumental in securing Abdul Jawan's release.

Abdullah was also asked to comment on a statement by Deputy Foreign Minister Datuk Dr Leo Michael Toyad in Parliament last week that the Government was disappointed over the slow progress made by the Philippine Government in securing the release of the hostages.

"We have always hoped that efforts to secure the release be accelerated but perhaps, the Philippines has problems.

"It is true that we want to see a speedy end but I think it is unwise to make any accusations at this juncture," Abdullah said.

Earlier, more than 5,000 people thronged the Kuching International Airport tarmac to welcome Dr Mahathir.

The Prime Minister, accompanied by his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, arrived on board an executive jet at 10.05am.

He was received by Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud, State Cabinet Ministers, local dignitaries and businessmen.

Standing along the 200-metre red carpet, people from all walks of life shook hands with the Prime Minister.

Many of them were carrying banners with the symbols of the State's four coalition parties - Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu, Sarawak United

People's Party, Sarawak National Party and Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak.

Dr Mahathir then left the airport to attend a meeting with State Barisan Nasional leaders.

In the afternoon, the Prime Minister was driven to the Borneo Highlands Resort at Padawan to officiate its opening.

Tomorrow, he will attend an all-community luncheon at the State Legislative Assembly building at Petra Jaya, officiate the opening of Wisma Chinese Chamber and attend a youth gathering at Stadium Perpaduan at Petra Jaya at night.

Dr Mahathir will leave for Kuala Lumpur on Monday.

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