

24/07/2000

Crisis drawing to a close

THERE is every indication that the Jolo hostage crisis is ending. The release of four more Malaysian captives on Friday augurs well for the on-going negotiations to free the remaining Malaysians from among several hostages held by rebels in the southern Philippine island of Jolo.

As Malaysian Ambassador to the Philippines Arshad M.A. Hussein put it, "Monday is the dawn of a new week ... let's see what it holds." He is optimistic that the remaining three Malaysians and the foreigners held hostage would be turned loose soon.

The trio is the last of nine Malaysians originally abducted along with 12 other foreign tourists from the Malaysian resort of Sipadan on April 23. Apart from the three remaining Malaysians, the rebels are still holding two Germans, two French nationals, two Finns, two South Africans, two Filipinos and a Lebanese. The kidnapers have so far freed six Malaysians and a German.

Following the freeing of hostages from neighbouring Basilan Island, many are hopeful that the three Malaysians held in Jolo would be released shortly. That means the negotiating team can concentrate its efforts on obtaining the freedom of the rest of the Sipadan captives.

If the disclosure of a senior Wisma Putra official is any index, the three Malaysians could be set free any minute now. The negotiating team is working overtime to gain the freedom of the Malaysians in time for President Joseph Estrada's 12-day official visit to the United States, which begins today.

Congratulations to the Philippine Government for its efforts in the long-drawn-out catastrophe which has been going on for three months now. The co-operation between the Philippine and Malaysian Governments is paying off. We are so grateful for that and so are the families of the freed hostages and the remaining ones. The mission of any hostage negotiating team is to pursue peaceful resolutions.

Speculations are rife that the freedom of the four Malaysians was bought. The Philippine and Malaysian governments have repeatedly denied ransom was paid for the release of the hostages.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Malaysia did not pay any ransom to secure Friday's liberation of the four Malaysians. Even so, the Malaysian Government had no power to stop other countries from paying ransom for the delivery of their nationals, he added.

It is vital that the hostages in captivity hang in there a while longer. They are experiencing a terrible ordeal and it is understandable if they are full of despair. They must keep up their spirits and persist in believing that their nightmare will stop in a little while. Although negotiating efforts have not been tied to any specific date, they may be released earlier than they expect. To those in the negotiating team, carry on the good work.

What next, now that the crisis is drawing to a close? It should lead to a great deal of introspection in those who are concerned with such issues. As is the case in other critical situations, there are lessons to be learnt from the Sipadan kidnapping.

Although such incidents are not so common, they are increasing, and planning ahead can save lives, time and money for the Governments involved. The best thing countries can do to protect themselves against such incidents is to take threats seriously.

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