

27 JUN 2000

OIC-Syed Hamid

DON'T TIE RELEASE OF MALAYSIANS TO UNRELATED MATTERS - SYED HAMID

KUALA LUMPUR, June 27 (Bernama) -- The release of the remaining eight Malaysians still held hostage by kidnappers on Jolo island should not be linked to unrelated matters, Foreign Minister Datuk Syed Hamid Albar said today.

Commenting on a newspaper report today that the hostage-takers wanted the release of an 85-year-old Filipino allegedly being held in Kota Kinabalu in exchange for the Malaysians, he said the issues involved were unrelated.

"I think it is a separate issue...I do not know why there should be a swap," he told reporters after the opening of the 27th session of the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers (ICFM) by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, here.

Syed Hamid said statements in the newspapers needed to be checked into.

It was reported that one of the leaders of the hostage-takers, Galib Andang, in a recorded message had demanded the release of one Mohamad Aklan, allegedly jailed for possession of firearms.

According to the report, Mohamad was believed to be a senior leader of a splinter group of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF).

Syed Hamid said that in Malaysia, foreigners were put behind bars for committing a crime and not for political reasons.

He said a person who had been sentenced by the court was merely going through the process of law, "hence I find it difficult to see why the release of the Malaysian hostages should be tied to Mohamad Aklan's freedom."

He said rather than making demands, it was more important for the parties concerned to negotiate and do their best to free the Malaysians as well as 12 other foreigners who were snatched from the Malaysian island resort of Sipadan on April 23 and brought to the southern Philippine island of Jolo.

Last Friday, the abductors freed one of the nine Malaysians kidnapped, wildlife ranger Zulkarnain Hashim who had since been reunited with his family.

--BERNAMA

MAD MAM AAM