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DPM: Don't compromise safety of captives

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said today any action that could jeopardise negotiations to secure the release of the Pulau Sipadan hostages should be avoided.

"It is important that no action be taken that can later derail the negotiation efforts," he said.

Abdullah, who is also Home Minister, said this when asked about yesterday's gunbattle between the Philippines troops and rebels holding the 21 hostages on Jolo Island.

Speaking after chairing the Umno management committee meeting at Menara Datuk Onn, Abdullah said Malaysia had conveyed to the Philippine authorities that ensuring the safety of hostages was the utmost priority.

"Aid like medicine, food and clothing had been sent for the hostages.

"The most important thing now is to start negotiation to secure their release."

In Manila, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Pandikar Amin Mulia expressed confidence that the abduction issue can be resolved by the Philippine government.

This was conveyed by him to Philippine President Joseph Estrada during their meeting at Malacanang Palace, here today.

Speaking to reporters after the meeting, Pandikar Amin, who is also the special representative of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to the Philippines in efforts to find a solution to the abduction.

He said the Philippine government also stated that it would try to resolve the abduction issue through negotiations.

Also present at the meeting were Deputy Defence Minister Datuk Shafie Apdal, Malaysian Ambassador to the Philippines Mohd Arshad M. Hussain, Armed Forces Chief Tan Sri Mohd Zahidi Zainuddin, South African High Commissioner to Malaysia Lindiwe Mabuzza and several senior government and embassy officials.

The hostages, comprising nine Malaysians, three Germans, two South Africans, two Finns, two French, two Filipinos and a Lebanese, were abducted by six gunmen on Sipadan island in the east coast of Sabah on April 23.

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