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Dr M: Loggers might be innocent

Sarban Singh; Chok Suat Ling; Raynore Mering

KAJANG, Thurs. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today said the Indonesian authorities should have verified whether four Malaysian loggers had encroached into their territory before they were detained.

The Prime Minister said the loggers might not have realised they had encroached into foreign territory as boundary markers did not cover the entire Sarawak-Kalimantan border.

"We want to know whether there is any truth in that (encroaching and carrying out illegal logging). Sometimes, not the entire border is marked."

Saying that one could unknowingly encroach into another's territory, Dr Mahathir said if the four were found to have been in Malaysian territory, the Indonesian authorities should release them immediately.

"I am not saying anything against Indonesia ... we do not want to break their law ... but if the four were in Malaysian territory, the only right thing to do is to release them," he said.

He was speaking to reporters after officially opening Universiti Tenaga Nasional today.

Yesterday, five men wearing Indonesian police uniforms detained the four Malaysians in a logging area at Ulu Sungai Jernang, Sematan district, near the Sarawak-Kalimantan border for allegedly stealing timber.

Dr Mahathir also gave examples of how Thai citizens had encroached into Malaysian territory on previous occasions.

"The Thais actually planted and tapped rubber trees on our side of the border. However, we did not arrest them.

"We even paid them compensation and asked them to leave, although they had encroached into our area," he said.

The Malaysians, currently held at the Commercial Crimes Centre in Pontianak to facilitate investigations, have been identified as Zaini Karim, 42, Jeranding anak Jabah, Antanai anak Panas and Ahmad Saparani.

Malaysian vice-consul in Pontianak, Mohammed Nizam Ramli, said today he had received a report from the Indonesian police, stating that the four were under a 20-day remand and accused of "illegal logging".

He said that about 11am, he was allowed to visit the detainees and found them in good condition.

In Kuching, State National Survey and Mapping Department officers ascertained that the loggers were in fact, between 500m and a kilometre away from the Sarawak-West Kalimantan border.

Lundu police chief, Assistant Superintendent Abang Abdillah Abang Majid said the border situation was currently "tense" and it would be best for Malaysian loggers to steer clear of the border.

On whether a fifth Malaysian, believed to be a timber company manager, was detained by the Indonesian police and later freed to "sort out their release", he said:

"I will only confirm that the man was released from Indonesian police custody."

Earlier, Zaini's father-in-law, Masli Karim, 67, had told the New Straits Times at his house in Sematan that he had met the manager two days ago.

"I believe the manager was told to get some money to secure the release of my son-in-law and the other three."

Zaini's wife, Mahyun Masli, 38, appealed to the Government to secure the

early release of her husband.

She said her husband had just begun working at Sungai Jernang, which she believed was a new timber concession area.

This is the second time that Indonesian authorities have detained Malaysians for allegedly encroaching into their territory.

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