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Dr M: We are willing to talk with kidnappers (HL)

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ALOR STAR, Thurs. - Malaysia is willing to negotiate with the gunmen who kidnapped 21 people from Pulau Sipadan last Sunday, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

He said the Government was willing to do anything to secure the release of the hostages.

Dr Mahathir, who was on a one-day visit to Kedah, said this to reporters at the Sultan Abdul Halim airport before returning to Kuala Lumpur this afternoon.

They were abducted in a Sunday night raid by six armed men in two boats and were seen headed towards Philippine waters.

"We are ready to negotiate ... if we can free the hostages, we will do anything. We will not leave out any options," the Prime Minister said.

On the Government's stand in dealing with terrorists, Dr Mahathir said: "We try to negotiate ... we even negotiated with the Japanese Red Army (guerillas) previously."

Asked if the Government would entertain demands made by the terrorists, including reports that they wanted RM10 million to free the hostages, Dr Mahathir said:

"I don't know about that, it's just speculation."

Asked if the Government was prepared to give in to such a demand if the reports were true, the Prime Minister said:

"We are not preparing anything, it is just all speculation so far."

Dr Mahathir said he was also not aware of Muslim Mindanao Governor Nur Misuari's efforts to help secure the release of the hostages.

He also dismissed reports the kidnappers were willing to release Malaysian hostages as mere speculation.

On reports of a rescue mission being planned, Dr Mahathir said it was being handled by the Philippines as the hostages were believed to be held in that country.

However, he said the Malaysian authorities, including police, navy and air force were also monitoring the situation and were on full alert.

Asked if the Government would accept foreign countries sending troops to handle the situation, Dr Mahathir said the decision should be made by the Philippines as the hostages were being held there.

Meanwhile, Bernama reports from Manila that Mindanao Governor Nur Misuari said today he would exert his best efforts for the speedy release of the 21 hostages held captive by kidnappers in Sulu province.

"I intend to use my old repertoire of tactics and strategies in dealing with this hostage situation. I want to proceed from a position of strength psychologically and even militarily," he told a news conference, here.

The kidnappers, reportedly belonging to the extremist Abu Sayyaf group, had demanded RM10 million in exchange for the freedom of the hostages, many of them foreign tourists.

Misuari warned that he would mobilise his "Bangsa Moro Army" to put a stop to kidnappings.

He heads the Moro National Liberation Front which had sealed a peace pact with the Government in 1996 to end its separatist war in southern Philippines.

"I will not tolerate any kidnap for ransom. I don't want society to fall victim to kidnapping or become hostages," Misuari said.

He said that as President Joseph Estrada's special negotiator, "I would

do my level best to expedite the release of the hostages."

He said that in an administrative order, President Estrada gave him a "general and comprehensive" mandate to deal with the hostage takers.

Misuari said Estrada had also instructed the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the Philippine National Police to cooperate with him to ensure the welfare and safety of the hostages.

He said the Lebanese Government, through the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), had also requested the Philippines that he be appointed negotiator for the release of the hostages, one of whom is a Lebanese woman.

Misuari, a separatist leader turned bureaucrat, has had a good track record in negotiating the safe release of kidnap victims in Mindanao.

He was responsible for the release of two Spanish nuns and two German nationals abducted in separate incidents several years ago.

According to Misuari, he was also involved in several negotiations abroad that also led to the safe release of hostages.

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