

21 JUL 2000

Sipadan-Return

FOUR RELEASED HOSTAGES RETURN TO SABAH

KOTA KINABALU, July 21 (Bernama) -- Four Malaysian hostages released by their armed abductors in Jolo Island, southern Philippines, returned here tonight, about 12 hours after they were set free.

They arrived at 8.55pm at the old terminal of the Kota Kinabalu International Airport aboard a special chartered light aircraft, the Piper Cheyenne 400 Turboprop, belonging to Medi Air Sdn Bhd.

Their family members had gathered at the airport as early as 6pm carrying posters welcoming their return.

Also present to welcome them were State Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Yahya Hussin, who represented Chief Minister Datuk Osu Sukam, and several other state cabinet ministers.

Immediately upon arrival, they were taken together with their immediate family members to a special room for about 10 minutes before they were taken to meet members of the press who had come in large numbers to cover their homecoming.

Wild Life Department ranger Francis Masangkim, 34, who was the first to answer questions on how they felt about coming home, said no words could describe his happiness.

"Today would have been exactly 90 days I was held hostage and I'm very happy to be freed and reunite with my family," he said.

Meanwhile, Lee Hock Leong, 20 and Baln Krishnan Nair, 34 expressed their gratitude to those responsible for securing their release.

"I thank the Malaysian and Philippine governments for their efforts to seek for my release," said Baln Krishnan.

Vincent Kwong, 40, said although he was happy for being released, he was also sad that three other Malaysians were still being held hostage in Jolo.

"Although we are no longer together (in Jolo), I hope we shall meet again in Sabah," he said.

Francis said there were times when they had given up hope after having been held hostage for so long.

However, they remained confident that they would soon be freed.

"There were no other thoughts except the desire to be free," he said.

On their plans after this, they all said they would like to rest for a while and be with their family before returning to work.

"After three months of detention, I feel that what I need now is a rest...after that I will return to work," Vincent said.

At the conclusion of the press conference, Francis, on behalf of his friends who returned together from Jolo, thanked Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Chief Minister Datuk Osu Sukam and several other individuals for being sensitive to their problems.

The four men were later taken by ambulance to Queen Elizabeth Hospital for check-up.

--BERNAMA

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