

06 JUL 2000

Weapons-Abdullah

GOVT THANKFUL FOR BLOODLESS END TO SAUK EPISODE, SAYS ABDULLAH

KUALA LUMPUR, July 6 (Bernama) -- Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said the government is thankful that the Sauk hostage-taking and the Gerik arms heist episode has ended bloodlessly with the surrender of the 27 perpetrators.

Abdullah, who is also Home Minister, said the government was pleased that its determination to avoid a bloody end to the problem paid off.

"This is achieved through excellent cooperation and coordination between the police, the armed forces and the various other agencies," Abdullah told a media conference at the Home Ministry here today.

The Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Norian Mai telephoned him at 4.44 pm today to inform about the surrender of the 27 men, the DPM said.

Abdullah said he in turn briefed Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who congratulated the security forces and those instrumental in defusing the crisis situation.

Abdullah said the gang was led by an ex-serviceman identified as Amin Razali while its members included highly-qualified people such as accountants, auditors and multi-media engineers.

He said the government made no offers or deals with the arms robbers but instead adopted a strategy of convincing them into giving up.

"We apply this strategy from start to finish and all concerned up to the prime minister himself concur. We ask them to surrender to avoid clashes, Their families too appeal to them to do so...this is a sound and firm approach," he said.

Abdullah said he received three telephone calls since morning on the arms robbers wanting to surrender.

"Starting with four, the number swells to 10, then 16 and eventually all give up, including the leader...altogether 27 people," Abdullah said.

On the three hostages held by the gang, Abdullah said the robbers executed two of them, a policeman and a soldier, and buried their bodies.

"We'll exhume their graves. They were murdered while on duty serving the country," he said.

Abdullah extended condolences to their next of kin and the government would decide later on the assistance for them.

On the identity of the gang members, Abdullah said what he had were only initial reports which could not be released yet as the police were still verifying them.

Asked on the possibility of other gang members escaping immediately after the armoury heists, Abdullah said police would elicit such information from those who surrendered today.

The 27 gang members who surrendered would be dealt with according to due process of the law as criminal acts were involved, he said.

Police had also detained other followers of the gang elsewhere for investigation, said Abdullah.

On the gang's motive and possible international links, Abdullah said this would only be known upon completion of police investigations on those who surrendered.

"We want to hear it from the horse's mouth, not to make speculation," he said.

Asked whether the gang has PAS members among them, Abdullah said he had no information on that.

Responding to a foreign journalist who enquired whether the activities of

the so-called Al-Ma'unah silat (martial art) group, formed in September, 1998, were linked to the dismissal of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim as deputy prime minister, Abdullah said he had no idea.

"I know there is such an organisation and it was registered. In term of their activities, we regard it as a silat group clearly inclined towards deviationist teachings, this is not right and is against akidah (Islamic faith," said Abdullah.

On the possibility of the government banning the silat group, Abdullah said: "I don't want to say anything at the moment because we have to make sure that the organisation involved and those involved are their people ... that's important."

"This is an isolated case. Had we known it sooner, we would have acted early," he said when asked whether the government would from now on be monitoring groups indulging in silat and mystical activities.

Abdullah said the entire episode was a lesson for all quarters that all security areas should be tightly protected and that the long-prevailing peace in the country should not be taken for granted.

On security forces weapons being used in criminal acts, Abdullah said the armed forces and the police each maintained strict control over the inventory of their armaments.

Abdullah also thanked the people of Sauk affected by the episode since Sunday for their understanding of the crisis and government handling of the situation the way it did.

"I have not at all received any negative reports from the local residents. For them, uppermost is to see the problem being handled well, putting peace and security first," he added.

-- BERNAMA

AR AHH RYN