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Islands for Filipino refugees identified

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KOTA KINABALU, Sun. - Several islands in the east coast of Sabah have been identified as a potential site for the proposed special camps for Filipinos fleeing to Malaysia to escape a Philippine military assault on rebels in Jolo.

The Director of the Federal Special Task Force on Illegal Immigrants, Datuk Abu Talib Harun, said logistics and monitoring aspects were among the key considerations in choosing the island to house the fleeing refugees.

Accompanied by the Commander of the Fifth Infantry Brigade, Brigadier-General Datuk Khalid Saad, Abu Talib made an aerial survey of all the islands in the east coast yesterday.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had on Friday said Filipinos fleeing to Malaysia to escape the military assault would be treated as war refugees and placed in a special camp.

"An announcement would be made once we have decided on the island," Abu Talib told reporters on his return from Tawau today.

He said despite the Government's readiness to set up the special camps, the Philippines should assist by preventing its people from fleeing to Malaysia.

Meanwhile, Khalid said another battalion from either Sarawak or the peninsula would be deployed within the next two weeks to beef up security in east coast of Sabah.

The deployment of the additional battalion is to complement the two battalions from the Fifth Infantry Brigade already in the area.

"We need more men to cover all the islands and strategic locations along the coastline," he said.

So far military personnel has been deployed on 15 of the more than 60 islands that needed to be covered.

Khalid also disclosed that the Royal Malaysian Navy spotted four boats anchored north of Pulau Tambisan off Sandakan last night, whose crew claimed to be barter traders from the southern Philippines.

Initial investigation showed that they had anchored off the island as they feared to return following the Philippine military assaults against the Abu Sayyaf rebels in the southern Philippine island of Jolo.

He said the Immigration Department had given permission to them to stay on the island for a few days.

"They are worried about their safety in view of the uncertainty in the southern Philippines," Khalid told reporters on his return here after touring several islands in the east coast of Sabah.

On reports that six armed men were sighted on Pulau Timba-Timba off Semporna yesterday, Khalid said a team from the navy and marine police sent to the area found nothing.

Located about an hour by speedboat from Semporna, Pulau Timba-Timba is a small island about 100 metres long and 80 metres wide with no vegetation.

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