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Last three home at last (HL)

Tony Emmanuel; Joniston Bangkuai  
THE look on their faces said it all...!

Shedding tears of joy, the three remaining Malaysians kidnapped from Pulau Sipadan left Jolo island just after dawn yesterday, and hours later, were reunited with their families.

An air of excitement filled the Kota Kinabalu International Airport's arrival lounge as family members and well-wishers were obviously relieved on seeing the specially chartered Syarikat Penerbangan Sabah Sdn Bhd aircraft land at 4.05pm.

In a highly emotional situation, cheers and tears rolled out freely as Ken Fong Yin Ken, Kua Yu Loong and Basilius Jim alighted from the aircraft, piloted by Ken's father Capt James Fong. On arrival, they were immediately mobbed by family members and relatives.

While the curtain may have come down as far as the Malaysians are concerned, the Jolo hostage crisis continues to attract global attention to the southern Philippines, as the foreigners kidnapped from the Sipadan Island Resort on April 23 are still held captive by the heavily armed Abu Sayyaf rebels.

The group is still holding six French, two Germans, two Finnish, two South Africans and 15 Filipinos.

Those taken captive from the island were Werner Gunter Kort and Marc Wallet (both Germans), Carel Strydom and wife Monique (South Africa), Sonia Wendling, Stephane Loisy and Marie Michel (France), Jahanen Risto Mikko and Franti Seppo Juhani (Finland), and a Filipino employee of the resort Roland Ullah.

Three French journalists and 12 Filipino Christian evangelists were also taken captive when they visited the Abu Sayyaf's stronghold.

Accompanying the freed Malaysians were Deputy Education Minister Datuk Abdul Aziz Samsuddin, former Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Yong Teck Lee, former Senator Datuk Sairin Karno and businessman Yusof Hamdan.

Clad in newly bought shirts and trousers, Ken, Basilius and Kua thanked Malaysians, with special reference to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, for their prayers and efforts in securing their release.

Besides family members and relatives, Deputy Chief Minister Datuk Wilfred Bumburing, who represented the State Government, and National Security Council director-general Datuk Jaafar Ismail were also present at the airport.

After a brief Press conference, the three were taken to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in an ambulance for medical examination.

Despite the four-month ordeal, the three appeared jovial throughout the Press conference, spicing some of their answers to the journalists with jokes.

While the incident and days in captivity bring back harrowing memories, the three said they would continue working on Sipadan island.

Twenty-eight-year-old Ken said words could not describe his feelings of being reunited with his family.

"How do you expect me to feel... of course I feel great," he said.

Ken, who is dive master with the Pulau Sipadan Resort, said after the six other Malaysian hostages were released they knew it would be a matter of time before they too would be released.

"We never gave up hope. We knew the day would come when we would be released," he said, adding that they were well taken care of and never

ill-treated by their captors.

Their greatest fear during the four months they were in captivity was not about whether they were going to be released or not, but the use of military force to rescue them.

"If a military operation had been launched to rescue us, it could have been disastrous for us," said Yin Ken.

Kua, 24, said he was relieved that the harrowing ordeal was finally over and he was reunited with his family whom "I missed so much".

He said while in captivity, they passed their time by playing cards.

"Actually I picked up some Tausug dialects while I was there," said Kua, who is the chief cook of Pulau Sipadan Resort.

Basilius, 31, said he was grateful to the Malaysian negotiators for the relentless efforts to secure their release.

"I missed my family so much... I am glad to be reunited with them," said the Wildlife Department Ranger.

In Zamboanga, Malaysian ambassador to the Philippines Mohamad Arshad Hussain welcomed the freed captives with Philippine chief negotiator Robert Aventajado at the Edwin Andrews Airforce Base.

Describing the afternoon event as more meaningful than previous ones, Arshad said efforts by the Philippine Government had led to almost half of the Sipadan captives being freed.

"This is a significant point and speaks immensely of the Philippine Government's efforts in handling the crisis," he said.

He congratulated Aventajado and members of the negotiating team for their dedication and praised Jolo-based Sulu Governor Abdusakur Tan and Mindanao tycoon Wee Lee Peng, whose behind the scenes efforts brought reality to the Malaysians' bid for freedom.

"Everyone knows that negotiating with abductors is an arduous and most difficult assignment."

But, he added, perseverance and hard work put in by the negotiators were already showing substantive results.

"I am confident the ambassadors of France, Finland, Germany and South Africa would similarly be invited to receive their nationals still held in captivity in days to come."

The release of the Malaysians was initially scheduled for Friday, but rough sea conditions and bad weather forced their return to be aborted.

Meanwhile, the Gaddafi International Association for Charitable Organisations, run by Seif el-Islam, son of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi announced it would withdraw its envoys, airplane and medical team if there was no "tangible, positive development" in the negotiations.

Former Libyan ambassador to the Philippines, Rajab Azzarouq, who travelled to the Abu Sayyaf's camp yesterday said the release of all the captives remained difficult because of disputes among the various Abu Sayyaf factions.

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