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Mahathir-Hostage

MALAYSIA DID NOT PAY RANSOM, SAYS DR MAHATHIR

PUTRAJAYA , July 22 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today Malaysia did not pay any ransom for the release of the Malaysian hostages held captive in Jolo, but is always keen to help develop the southern Philippines.

The prime minister said that in fact Malaysia was already helping by creating jobs through its investments, including opening up oil palm oil plantations there.

He said this when asked to comment on the release of four more Malaysian hostages in Jolo yesterday and frequent reports by the foreign wire agencies that Malaysia had paid for their release despite denials from Malaysia and the Philippine government.

Asked to comment on a report that Malaysia had pledged to develop the southern Philippines in exchange for the release of the hostages, Dr Mahathir said:

"I don't know whether that is a commitment or not. I have to look into it...maybe somebody else made the commitment, but we are always keen to develop the southern Philippines,".

Dr Mahathir was speaking to reporters after opening Puspanita's annual general meeting, here.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia was prepared to upgrade economic development in the southern Philippines so that the Filipinos there would get more income.

The four Malaysians released by the armed group in Jolo yesterday were among a group of 21 Malaysians and foreigners kidnapped from Sipadan Island about three months ago.

Two Malaysians and a German woman were released earlier while 14 others, including three more Malaysians are still in captivity.

Asked further about the ransom payment, Dr Mahathir said the government did not have the power to stop others from paying but the government was not at all involved in any payment of compensation.

"We have no power to stop others if they want to pay. That is their problem. I don't know whether others have paid," he said.

Asked why the Malaysian hostages were freed first, Dr Mahathir said he would not know.

"They said only Muslims but I could see non-Muslims were released also. I don't know, it's the decision of the people (armed group). We hope others will be released also," he said.

-- BERNAMA

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