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Gusmao-Peacekeepers

M'SIA CAN PLAY LARGER MILITARY ROLE IN EAST TIMOR, SAYS GUSMAO

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 9 (Bernama) -- Malaysia can play a larger military role in the United Nations peacekeeping operation in East Timor, said East Timor leader Xanana Gusmao.

"Maybe the leadership of the peacekeeping force could rotate among some countries of Asia...from the Philippines it could go Malaysia and Thailand," he said.

Malaysia would have to play a bigger role militarily if it were to take up the leadership of the peacekeeping operation, said Gusmao at a press conference at the end of his three-day visit here.

Speaking in faltering English, Gusmao, who is president of the National Council for Timor Resistance, was aided by council vice president Jose-Ramos Horta during the press conference.

Malaysia has a force of about 20 military observers serving under the UN Transitional Authority in East Timor (UNTAET) which is currently headed by a Philippine general.

"Malaysia would have to increase its military presence, its contribution to the peacekeeping, along with the leadership role," he said.

"We hope that it will, because Malaysia has a competent professional army and we express our trust in them and we would like to see a greater Malaysian presence in East Timor," said Gusmao.

He said the involvement should not only be in peacekeeping but also in the civil administration as Malaysia has one of the best civil administration in the developing world.

Horta said this request had been conveyed to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar during talks with them earlier.

Horta said: "The security situation has been restored and overall security depends on our relationship with Jakarta rather than elements in West Timor."

Besides maintaining the security, Horta said, the 9,000 UN peacekeepers in East Timor should also be dedicated in civil duties involving army engineers and doctors, for example, in reconstruction efforts.

Horta also lauded Dr Mahathir's efforts in developing Malaysia into a peaceful and economically stable country, saying a visionary who has elevated Malaysia to be the envy and model of developing countries certainly deserved commending.

"What have been achieved here in Malaysia, in every sense, peace, stability harmony, economic and social progress are just exceptional," said Horta.

Asked about his views of Dr Mahathir, Horta compared him to "two other exceptional individuals in the world" namely Cuban leader Fidel Castro and South Africa's Nelson Mandela.

"These three men, they can speak their minds and they displease many people, and those who are displeased cannot do anything about it anyway," he said.

He said although Dr Mahathir and Castro are at the opposite ends ideologically, both often "speak out very strongly in support of the third world agenda".

"They have the courage to do it and they are admired because of it," Horta added.

Meanwhile, Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said the Cabinet

at its meeting today agreed of a larger role by the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) in East Timor.

Whatever the role, it would be subjected to Malaysia's capability, the need of East Timor and agree to the United Nations (UN), he said.

"We will make a study soon...in principle we are prepared to widen our role and help the people of East Timor during the transition period until they can form a government," he told reporters at his office after presenting a cheque for RM24,051.62 from the Armed Force Fund Board (LTAT) to R.Marthevi, the mother of P.Kumaresan, a navy personnel who died in a road accident on May 17 last year.

To a question, Najib said the people of East Timor had shown a very positive attitude towards Malaysia's involvement.

"Initially there was suspicion but once they noticed the role we played, their perception of us improves for the better," he said.

Najib also said Malaysia would wait for further developments from the world body if it agreed with Gusmao's suggestion that Asean countries took turn to head UNTAET.

Malaysia first joined the UN peacekeeping forces in the 60s in Congo, Africa and since then had played active roles in peacekeeping operations, enforcing the peace and taking part in observer missions in areas of conflict in the world.

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