

13 JUNE 2000

Mahathir-Kidnappers

M'SIA WILL NOT ENTERTAIN WILD CLAIMS ON KIDNAPPERS' DEMANDS - DR M

KUALA LUMPUR, June 13 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today Malaysia will not entertain wild claims made against the country with regard to the demands of the kidnappers who are holding 21 people including nine Malaysians hostage in Jolo, an island in southern Philippines.

The Prime Minister said there had been views supporting the claims and also rejecting them and in fact, there were also those who took advantage of the kidnappers' demands.

"Hence, we hear all sorts of claims but we will not give consideration to wild claims," he told a media conference at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Airport in Subang on his return from a week-long visit to Japan.

Dr Mahathir said this when asked to comment on a report quoting Malaysia's Ambassador to the Philippines Mohamad Arshad Manzoor Hussain as saying that the Philippine Immigration chief Rufus Rodriguez supported the kidnappers' request that Kuala Lumpur investigate human rights violations against the 500,000-strong Filipino population in Sabah.

According to Arshad, Rodriguez's support was contrary to Manila's stand which had rejected the demand.

Asked whether the Malaysian government would put forward other proposals to secure the release of the 21 hostages, Dr Mahathir said at the moment, the government did not know what the kidnappers actually wanted.

The hostages including 12 foreigners were kidnapped on April 23 from Pulau Sipadan in Sabah and were held captive in various places in the jungle on Jolo Island for the past 51 days.

"Some say they want money but we are afraid that the Philippine government may not agree if we give money, so, what do we get. This is an unusual matter like people holding a weapon on our head and asking us to make a decision, so, it's a bit difficult," he said.

Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, who was at the airport to receive Dr Mahathir. said he would leave for Manila tomorrow to get the actual information and latest developments on the kidnap drama.

Asked on Mohamad Arshad's statement that Rodriguez backed the kidnappers' request, he said: "The Immigration Chief's statement has nothing to do with us, and neither they can dictate to us (Malaysia) on what we should do."

He said the negotiators must put the interest of the hostages' safety and security first and ensure that they were released safely.

"They should not be discussing side issues," he added.

-- BERNAMA

HS AFY ZS TS