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No to demand for commission

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JITRA, Fri. - Malaysia does not agree to the creation of a commission to investigate allegations of maltreatment of Filipino Muslim immigrants in Sabah.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the Government could not meet the demand.

The demand is one of two political conditions imposed by the Philippine hostage-takers.

"We have never had a commission with such groups, what would the Filipino Government say if we did?" he said, stressing that Malaysia also would not like to have rebels from the country asking another government to set up such a commission.

Dr Mahathir was asked about the Government's view on demands by kidnapers at a press conference after attending a gathering with Taman Desa Damai residents near here today.

The kidnapers had also demanded an independent state as the other condition for the release of the hostages whom they abducted from the Sipadan island in Sabah.

The group is holding nine Malaysians and 12 foreigners.

The demands were made in a letter to the Philippines Government.

This followed Philippines President Joseph Estrada's instruction to government negotiators to ask the rebels to put their demands in writing.

Dr Mahathir said the Government had been host to uninvited immigrants, including in Sabah.

The immigrants were given special treatment and were enjoying facilities meant for Malaysians.

"They use our clinics, hospitals and schools until sometimes there are more of them than Malaysians.

"If they do not commit crimes then there are no problems," he said, adding that in Sabah alone, the Government spends millions of ringgit to provide education to the immigrants' children and to treat them in hospitals.

Dr Mahathir said it was not right for Malaysia to mistreat Filipino immigrants but sometimes action had to be taken if the immigrants commit offences.

"Sometimes they own firearms and in Malaysia this is not allowed unless there is a special permit," he added.

On the apology by the kidnapers to Dr Mahathir which was relayed through one of the group leaders, Ghalib Andang @ Robot, the Prime Minister said:

"I hope all the hostages will be freed, not only the Malaysians. I think the whole world is aware of the problem they (the kidnapers) face.

"If they release the hostages perhaps they may gain some sympathy from the world but if they do not, I think the world will look at it in a bad light and they would not achieve anything through their struggles."

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