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PM: We won't accuse any party till we have clear info

gkasan; Joniston Bangkuai

PUTRAJAYA, Tues. - Malaysia will help in efforts to secure the release of the Sipadan Island hostages but will not accuse any party for the incident until clear information has been received along with their motives, said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Currently, 21 people are believed to be held captive by a group of heavily-armed gunmen in the incident which took place on Sunday night at Sipadan island, off the coast of Sabah.

Asked whether the Government would tighten security measures on tourist islands, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia was not in serious danger.

"What happened was that during the economic downturn, the Government cut down the use of patrol boats.

"Now we have started patrols again," he told a Press conference at his office today.

Asked to comment on reports that the hostage takers chose Sipadan Island as Malaysia was seen as a "soft" link where security was not as tight as in other places, Dr Mahathir said it could be true.

"That is their assessment, because we don't have this kind of thing happening in Malaysia.

Dr Mahathir declined to comment on foreign Press reports which stated that the hostage takers were from the Abu Sayyaf group. "That's their report, I cannot comment."

Dr Mahathir said there was a possibility that the hostage takers had targeted foreigners.

"We don't know why, but the place had never had an incident like this before. We do not want to accuse anybody, so we are investigating," he said.

Asked whether the incident would affect tourism in Sabah, Dr Mahathir said:

"Yes, it will affect Sabah but the rest of the country is not affected, I think. Malaysia is a very safe place for tourists.

"Other countries may not be safe but we have always been safe.

"This was not done by our people. Obviously other people had done it."

On another development, Dr Mahathir commented on the incident in Miami, Florida in the United States on Saturday where heavily-armed US agents burst into the home of Cuban shipwreck survivor Elian Gonzalez and snatched the boy from the arms of the fisherman who rescued him five months ago.

Dr Mahathir said he noted news pictures of how the boy was snatched by the authorities at gunpoint.

"By comparison we are very gentle people," he said.

The incident also sparked off demonstrations which had to be forcibly quelled by police.

"Just see how they beat up people until they fell to the ground," said Dr Mahathir.

"I am not against the American people, but I don't like their Press, and I don't like some members of their Government who have been very unfair to us," he said.

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