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Ransom to be considered (HL)

PENANG, Sun. - Malaysia may have to consider the US\$1 million (RM3.8 million) ransom demand made by kidnappers for each of the 21 Sipadan captives held on the southern Philippine island of Jolo.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today that Malaysia would have to consider whatever move to secure the release of the captives.

Malaysia also had to ensure their safety, he said when asked to comment on the ransom demand.

Dr Mahathir was speaking to reporters after a brief tour of Penang island.

The nine Malaysians, a German family of three, a French couple, a Finnish couple, two South Africans, two Filipinos and a Lebanese were kidnapped by gunmen from a dive resort on Sipadan off Sabah on April 23.

Dr Mahathir said: "We are forced to also consider this proposal because we want to help ensure the safety of the hostages.

"In principle, we don't accept this kind of thing ... but we are facing a situation where the kidnappers may do something to the hostages. Therefore, we have to consider whatever means to save them."

According to a report from Zamboanga in southern Philippines on Friday, the kidnappers have demanded a ransom of US\$1 million for the release of each captive.

"The leaders (of the kidnappers) told me 'Let's get this problem over with and pay us 40 million pesos (nearly US\$1 million) for each of the 21 captives'," an emissary who spoke on condition of anonymity said last week.

However, Chief Philippine Government negotiator Roberto Aventajado refused to confirm the ransom demand and said that, in any case, a demand for US\$1 million would be excessive.

In Kuala Lumpur, Dr Mahathir's sentiment was echoed by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who said that the Government needed to consider whether it was reasonable or otherwise.

However, it did not mean Malaysia was giving in to the demand.

"There is a possibility of it being totally rejected," he said. "It is difficult for us to just pay up ... we need to look into the problem thoroughly.

"If we simply pay up, some may say that we succumbed to pressure ... what is important is for us to save the hostages fast."

Malaysia, he said, would also discuss the matter further with the Philippine Government.