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Rapport needed to curb piracy

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THE military action against the kidnappers in Jolo yesterday is the culmination of months of Philippine Government's sense of helplessness and impotence at the antics of Ghalib Andang and his bunch of outlaws.

Advised by the military and goaded on by other elements, President Joseph Estrada and his officials have chosen to ignore the pleas of foreign governments whose nationals are still held captives not to do anything that may endanger their lives.

Among the hostages are three Malaysians abducted last Sunday from the resort island of Pandanan just a few hours after the last of 21 people seized from Sipadan on April 23 were released.

Millions of dollars, euphemistically described as "board and lodging expenses" and not ransom were paid to the kidnappers. Negotiators are still trying to get the release of the three Malaysians.

It is well known that the Armed Forces of the Philippines were just waiting for the release of the hostages to begin an exercise to wipe out the group of kidnappers and their supporters.

The kidnappers, who claim to be fighting for the cause of the Abu Sayyaf rebels, are aware of this and the kidnapping of the three Malaysians is seen as an attempt to replenish their "stock" of foreign hostages to avert a military attack.

People like Andang or Commander Robot and Mujib Susukan who led the raid on Sipadan joined the Abu Sayyaf, widely speculated to be the creation of the Philippine military, to give some kind of legitimacy to what they were doing.

The Abu Sayyaf leaders in Jolo accepted them as they see the kidnapping, especially of foreigners, would give publicity to their cause of creating an Islamic state and also some share of the ransom.

But a rift quickly developed between the Abu Sayyaf old guards and its new members which left Andang and Susukan almost totally in charge of the hostages and the negotiations with the government team.

Thus, while Pandanan gave the kidnappers more foreigners as hostages and therefore more ransom (call it by any other name), it also decided for the military that enough was enough and that it had to act.

Malaysia has also been making threatening noises following last Sunday's abduction. Both the government and the public are angry that this should happen so soon after the last of the 21 people seized from Sipadan on April 23 were released. It was as if an act of faith had been violated.

The military has been given more power to act against intruders into Malaysian waters where security is being stepped up. Intruders face the possibility of being shot on sight.

One reason for the threatening snarl and growl, hopefully to be accompanied by equally menacing moves, is to deter other would-be kidnappers from across the Sulu Sea who may have been encouraged by the success and ease with which the raids were carried out.

The other is to assure an angry public that everything possible is being done to secure Malaysian lives and shores - and that there would not be another recurrence.

Malaysians are angry also because tourism, and therefore the economy of the country is threatened. And as stated by Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, Malaysia's very sovereignty is being threatened.

Many have openly stated that had the stepped up security along the Sabah

east coast after Sipadan continued there would probably be no Pandanan or other similar incidents.

While the security agencies should accept some responsibility for the recurrence, they cannot be totally blamed. Limited resources and long coastlines make complete security impossible.

Security is helped by bilateral and regional cooperation. There are joint border commissions between Malaysia and Thailand and Malaysia and Indonesia and they helped to resolve border problems and also oversee the security situation along their borders.

There is none between Malaysia and the Philippines and whatever security cooperation they may have between them is more ad hoc and therefore ineffective.

Even though the two countries are members of Asean, relations between them have always been under a cloud except for the six years when Fidel Ramos was the President of the Philippines.

Because of the longstanding Philippines claim to Sabah relations have been described as cordial but having "a fishbone in the throat". During the Ramos presidency the "fishbone" was forgotten and hence the cooperation and joint ventures between the two countries.

It is clear that under President Joseph Estrada the "fishbone" is back in place for one evident and other reasons. An obvious indicator is the fate of the republic's Consulate General in Kota Kinabalu mooted under Ramos as a means of looking after more than half a million Filipinos in Sabah.

Under Estrada, the argument that the establishment of a Consulate General in Kota Kinabalu would be tantamount to the recognition of Sabah as part of Malaysia gained ascendancy.

And thus Manila is dragging its feet on the matter even though Malaysia has already established its Consulate General in Davao, Mindanao. It is also evident that Sipadan and Pandanan are not helping to improve relations.

Thus, until the level of cooperation between the two countries improves further, Malaysia will have to take care of the security of the Sabah east coast itself.

Under this condition it is not surprising that some people in the Philippines may see Malaysia's determination to keep out intruders from the Philippines as an act of belligerency just as when many Filipinos near Sipadan were rounded by the police after 21 hostages were abducted.

Many government leaders and newspaper columnists decried the action by the Malaysian police as an unfriendly act. They were joined by some Muslim leaders of Mindanao who said Malaysians were being unfriendly to "their brothers".

Malaysians, including Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, countered that the Filipinos, the bulk of whom are illegals, have more or less been allowed to work in Sabah unhindered.

Some chose to abuse the hospitality extended to them by committing crimes and becoming informants to criminal groups from Mindanao who, even before Sipadan and Pandanan, had raided villages and even towns such as Lahad Datu where a bank was robbed.

Such hospitality includes relaxation of law enforcement against the Filipino illegals and allowing traders from Mindanao to keep their guns even while in Malaysian waters to protect themselves against piracy.

It is certain that the laws would now be strictly enforced as far as illegal immigrants are concerned. And it is a good thing that this is happening as the action of the Philippine military against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front rebel groups and the kidnappers in Jolo would certainly see more Filipinos coming to seek refuge in Sabah.

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