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Rebels free remaining Malaysian captives, bad weather delays their journey home

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THE three remaining Malaysians held captive by rebels on Jolo island, in the southern Philippines, were freed yesterday but bad weather and rough sea conditions dashed their journey home.

Expected to accompany Ken Fong, Basilius Jim and Kua Yu Loong is Filipino Roland Buaco, a Sipadan Island Resort employee.

They were among 21 Malaysians and foreigners kidnapped at gunpoint and taken to Jolo on Apr 23 - 117 days ago.

"It was raining the whole day and choppy conditions make sea travel extremely hazardous," a source on Jolo island told the New Straits Times yesterday.

Barring the completely unforeseen, the source expects them to be freed tomorrow and reunited with their families.

In Zamboanga, a Super King jet that was specially chartered from Sabah Air Sdn Bhd touched down at the international airport in anticipation of the release of the Malaysians.

Among those on board the plane piloted by Ken's father Capt James Fong, was former Sabah Chief Minister Yong Teck Lee.

Declining to repond to media queries, Yong left the airport and proceeded to the home of Mindanao tycoon Wee Lee Peng.

Philippine chief negotiator Robert Aventajado, who spent the day in Manila briefing European Union ambassadors on efforts to end the four-month crisis, arrived just after dusk yesterday.

He is scheduled to officiate at the hand over of freed captives today.

Although the weather eased up a bit last night, the releases were still held back as night landings are not allowed on Jolo.

(Located about 1,000km south of Manila, Zamboanga, about 200km away, is the nearest city to Jolo.)

Wee told journalists that with the release of the Malaysian captives, he was glad the crisis had come to an end.

"Our emissary has informed us that he has the three Malaysians and they are on their way to Zamboanga.

"(Malaysian) Prime Minister Mahathir requested us to help secure the release of the Malaysians... and we are glad it's finally over."

While Wee declined to confirm whether a ransom was indeed paid, his aide disclosed "a little amount of ransom" was agreed upon.

In Kuala Lumpur, Deputy Education Minister Datuk Aziz Samsuddin heaved a sigh of relief on learning of the Malaysians' impending release.

"We should be thankful they are finally set to see freedom," he told NST.

Although no official confirmation was forthcoming, the NST learnt a RM5 million (50 million peso) ransom was agreed upon to ensure the trio's release.

Having spent about four hours yesterday with the Malaysian captives, the source in Jolo described them to be low in morale and agitated over rumours of an impending rescue-cum-military offensive.

The release of another SIR employee Louvesia Dablo on Wednesday took the Malaysians by surprise.

"They (especially Ken Fong) were concerned about who would be speaking on behalf of the Filipino employees.

"Little did they expect Dablo's release... in fact, they still find it

hard to believe," the source said.

In Manila, Malaysian ambassador Mohamad Arshad Hussain confirmed the release had been expected but attributed extreme bad weather to have hampered preparations.

He is expected to arrive in Zamboanga today, to be present for the hand over of the captives officiated by Aventajado.

Six other Malaysians - Zulkarnain Hashim, Abdul Jawah Selawat, Vincent Kong, Lee Hock Liang, Francis Masangkim and Baln Krishnan Nair - were released in stages last June and July.

Of the foreigners abducted, only German Renate Juta and Filipina Louvesia Dablo have been released.

The others still in captivity are Werner Gunter Kort and Wallert Marc (both Germans); Carel and Monique Strydom (South Africans); Risto Mikro Jahanen and Seppo Juhani Franti (Finnish); Filipino Roland Buaco; French Loisy Stephone and French-Lebanese Marie Moarbes.

(END)