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Solomons asks KL to delay evacuation

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THE Solomon Islands has requested that Malaysia delay the evacuation of its nationals from the islands as most of them are workers and investors in the crisis-torn territory, said Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar.

He said the Government is prepared to evacuate the 150 Malaysians there and have sought cooperation from the Defence Ministry to do so.

"Before we can make the final decision, we received a message from Solomon Islands which said that they do not want Malaysian citizens to leave the islands as most of them are workers and investors there," he told a press conference in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Nevertheless, he said, the Government is monitoring the situation closely and has enough information to take the necessary action should the situation in the islands get worse.

Malaysia has substantial investments in the Solomon Islands including a recent RM80 million oil palm project by Kumpulan Emas Bhd.

The Solomon Islands, about 1,600km north east of Australia, is currently under ethnic tension with two groups from the islands of Malaita and Guadalcanal struggling for dominance.

Meanwhile, Syed Hamid said the Government does not support any individual initiatives to release the 21-hostages held by the Abu Sayyaf group in Jolo, Philippines.

"If there are news reports saying that we are behind such initiatives by Malaysians or other individuals, I would like to categorically state that this is not right," he said.

Syed Hamid said he plans to use his two-day working visit to the Philippines beginning this Wednesday, to seek the latest development on the hostage situation.

He said although Malaysia is informed of the situation in Jolo, a lot of "conflicting stories" have been coming out.

"There is a lot of ambiguity. It seems so many parties are involved and we are concerned (about this)," he said.

Syed Hamid is scheduled to meet Philippine President Joseph Estrada, Foreign Secretary Domingo Siazon and Defence Secretary Orlando Mercado during his visit.

"My visit will enable me to have a better feel of what is happening and the progress done. It will also hope to reiterate that the whole settlement of this issue should be done peacefully, and that the safety and lives of the hostages should be our prime consideration," he said.

On whether the death of Syrian President Hafez al-Assad will disrupt the Middle East peace talks, Syed Hamid said he is confident that the country's new leadership will continue the negotiations with a positive attitude.

"Generally, all leaders in that region want peace. It is more important to find the acceptable conditions that can lead to it," he said.

Asked to comment on Chechan President Aslan Maskhadov's reported request that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad act as the "middleman" to mediate a settlement to the ongoing conflict between Russia and Chechnya, Syed Hamid said the issue is an internal matter, and Russia should be able to solve the problems through peaceful means.

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