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Trio may be last to see freedom

Tony Emmanuel in Zamboanga

THREE Malaysians held captive by rebels in Jolo could end up being the last hostages to be freed following reported disagreements among "backdoor" emissaries from Sabah.

Realising their presence here, Philippine Government-appointed chief negotiator Robert Aventajado said the emissaries complicated the much-anticipated release of Ken Fong, Basilius Jim and Kua Yu Loong - the remaining Malaysians yet to see freedom.

On April 23, 21 people were taken hostages by kidnapppers from Pulau Sipadan, nine of whom were Malaysians.

Through the aid of a private channel, Aventajado said he had expressed his disappointment to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad over the episode.

Speaking at a Press conference before departing from the Edwin Andrews Air Force base, Aventajado said the problem (delay in the release of the Malaysians) rested with the Malaysian officials.

Aventajado was to meet the officials on Saturday, but the meeting never materialised.

Sources close to the government negotiating panel disclosed that the Sabah-based emissaries were carrying out their own negotiations with the kidnapppers.

Claiming to represent the interest of the victims' families, they were working outside the official knowledge of both Malaysian and Philippine Governments.

However, informants working for the negotiating panel revealed that the emissaries claimed they were working under instructions from Deputy Education Minister Datuk Aziz Samsuddin and former Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Yong Teck Lee.

Being official government representatives, Aventajado said it would not be appropriate for them to be described as backdoor emissaries.

Citing an example, Aventajado recollected how the Philippine media claimed that a Sabah-based drug lord had paid an undisclosed amount of ransom to secure the release of the six Malaysians.

"Such media reports should not be linked to government officials and it was on this note that I am inviting the Malaysians (Aziz and Yong) to clear whatever misconception there may be."

Aventajado said he was informed that both Aziz and Yong could arrive in Zamboanga tomorrow.

"Once they are here, I will immediately fly in from Manila."

(END)