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Mahathir-hostages

MALAYSIA WILL STUDY REQUEST FOR MALAYSIANS TO NEGOTIATE WITH ABU SAYYAF

KUALA LUMPUR, June 12 (Bernama) -- Malaysia will study a Philippine request to allow two Malaysians to negotiate the release of several hostages held by Abu Sayyaf separatist Muslim rebels in southern Philippines, the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohamad said.

"We will study it. I think if it is not too much of a problem, we will (allow)," he said.

Dr Mahathir was responding to reporters who asked whether the Malaysian government would accede to the Abu Sayyaf's demand for two Malaysians to take part in the negotiation process.

Reporters approached the prime minister on this after attending a luncheon hosted by Petronas in conjunction with the 2001 Asia Oil & Gas Conference here today.

The Philippine government yesterday agreed to Malaysian negotiators to mediate in the hostage crisis as demanded by the Abu Sayyaf group who has threatened to behead an American captive if its demand was not met.

Abu Sayyaf has named the two Malaysians as former senator Datuk Sairin Karno and businessman Yusof Hamdan, both from Sabah.

Foreign wire agencies today reported that the Muslim group had beheaded one of the three American hostages, but President Gloria Arroyo said she had no confirmation to the claim.

Reuters today quoted Presidential spokesman Rigoberto Tiglao as saying that the Malaysian government had been informed of the situation but there had been no definite word that the negotiator could come.

Manila previously rejected the involvement of any foreign negotiator in what Arroyo said was an internal Philippine problem.

The are now three Americans and 28 Filipinos held captive by the Abu Sayyaf group after being kidnapped from a beach resort in Palawan on May 27 and from a village on southern Basilan island.

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