

13/06/2001

PM: We may send negotiators

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Malaysia will consider a request from the Philippine Government to allow two Malaysians to help negotiate the release of hostages held by the Abu Sayyaf group.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today the matter would be considered although the Government had yet to receive any formal request.

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

Dr Mahathir said this when asked by reporters on whether the Government would change its earlier stand of not allowing the two negotiators - former senator Datuk Sairin Karno and businessman Yusof Hamdan, both from Sabah - to mediate in securing the release of hostages held by the group.

The Prime Minister had earlier addressed delegates to the 6th Asia Oil and Gas conference at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel.

The Abu Sayyaf, who are holding more than two dozen captives on Basilan island, have demanded that the two Malaysians take part in the negotiation process.

They threatened to behead an American captive if their demand was not met. Philippine authorities yesterday dropped their objection to the demand.

However, despite the Philippine Government's last-minute partial concession, the rebels said they had killed Guillermo Sobero of Corona, California, after expiry of the deadline, and would halt talks.

In Kota Kinabalu, Yusof said he was extremely upset over reports that the Abu Sayyaf had beheaded one of the three American captives.

"If this is verified, neither myself nor Datuk Sairin would want to become mediators. They have gone back on their word not to execute the hostages.

"We now fear for our own safety. If we are there, they might just decide to hold us as hostages as well ... and later, they might also chop off our heads," Yusuf said.

Sairin and Yusuf were among several Malaysians involved in negotiations last year when the Abu Sayyaf kidnapped 21 people from a resort on Malaysia's Sipadan island.