

02/11/2003

Abducted men may still be alive, says Najib

PETALING JAYA, Sat. - Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak today said there is a possibility that five men, abducted from the Borneo Paradise Eco Farm Resort in Kunak, Sabah, on Oct 5, are still alive.

He said this was based on conflicting reports received from the Philippine authorities even though the five were earlier said to have been executed by their kidnapers.

"There are reports that claim they (hostages) are still alive. As long as there are no bodies, we cannot make any conclusion," he said at the Royal Malaysian Air Force base in Subang.

Efforts were being made to get details on what actually happened, Najib said after seeing off former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his wife Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali who left for a vacation abroad.

"Our DA (Defence Attache) in Manila will inform us about any development," he said.

Yesterday, Bernama reported that the sixth hostage who "survived" the incident, admitted that he was no longer sure whether the kidnapers had really executed them.

The spokesman for the Armed Forces of the Philippines South Command, Lt Col Renoir Pascua, was reported to have told a Philippine news channel that the survivor, Novelito Arkusil, 19, might be confused when he was first questioned, leading to his conflicting statements.

His account of the "execution" was doubtful following inconsistencies in his statements, Pascua said.

The Philippine military had yet to find the bodies of the five men and considering Arkusil's doubtful statements, the operation to retrieve the bodies might be shifted from "search to rescue", he said.

Arkusil and the five were abducted when 10 gunmen stormed the resort, located in the east coast of Sabah, about 10.30pm on Oct 5 and forced them onto a boat before speeding off into the darkness.

In Kota Kinabalu, Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Seri Musa Aman was quoted by Bernama as advising the families of the five hostages to be patient and pray for their safety as there were no reliable reports confirming their deaths.

"I am still waiting for the latest report on what really happened to them. It cannot be confirmed that they have been killed," he said at Kota Kinabalu International Airport after returning from Kuala Lumpur.