

## **Zahid: Release of hostage soured by added demands**

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Negotiations for the release of the hostages held by Abu Sayyaf militants in the Philippines turned sour after the hostage takers sought to impose additional conditions, Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi said today.

Zahid said this occurred after the militants had promised to release both the hostages, Bernard Then and Thien Nyuk Fun, who were abducted together from Sandakan, Sabah, in May.

“The federal and the (Sabah) state governments had tried their best to secure the release of both victims. But unfortunately, what happened was very saddening to us because the relevant party had promised our negotiators to release both of them.

“Unfortunately, they had placed several additional conditions, and this was very unwelcomed by the negotiators,” Zahid, who is also home minister, told a press conference in Kuala Lumpur today.

Thien was released on Nov 8, but Then was reportedly murdered by his captors.

### **Sack with severed head**

A sack with Then's name and containing a severed head was subsequently found on Jolo Island, and Philippine authorities are working to confirm, from DNA evidence, whether it is indeed Then's head.

If confirmed, Zahid said, the government will seek the speedy repatriation of the remains to Then's family.

According to a report by Sin Chew Daily last night, the hostage takers had bickered on how to split the ransom money they had received, and therefore decided to hold back one hostage, despite promising his release.

The report quoted anonymous sources as saying the hostake takers faced a military assault from the Philippine government after releasing Thien, and they murdered Then because the leg injury he had suffered in captivity was slowing down the fleeing militants.

Meanwhile, Dewan Rakyat Speaker Pandikar Amin Mulia shot down a motion by DAP Sandakan parliamentarian Stephan Wong to debate the Sabah abduction.

He ruled that the government had made its best effort to have both the hostages freed.

At a press conference at the Parliament lobby later, Wong said the House needed to debate

the reasons that led to Then's death, particularly when the police seemed hopeful that he would be released few days before he was killed.

"The people want to know what happened," he said.

"We hope the premier can bring up the issue at the Asean Summit as part of efforts to wipe out the terrorist groups," he said.

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