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NEWS

Army set to end stand-off

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CORDONED OFF:

Intruders urged to surrender to avoid further bloodshed

LAHAD DATU

AFTER almost 20 days of negotiations and a bloody encounter on Friday, the army moved into Felda Sahabat yesterday, giving indication that the stand-off here was going to end soon.

Truckloads of army personnel were seen yesterday moving into the cordoned off area, where more than 100 members of the Sulu Army have been holed up.

This latest development came following Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak's announcement on Friday that he was giving full mandate to the police and army to end the crisis, which has gripped the nation, as soon as possible.

The police and army are now working together to bring this crisis to an end.

The security forces, however, are still giving the gunmen the opportunity to surrender without further bloodshed.

Sabah police commissioner Datuk Hamza Taib told reporters here yesterday that police had once again dropped leaflets from the air,



Members of the General Operations Force patrolling an area near Kampung Tanduo. Pic by Edmund Samunting

urging the intruders to surrender.

The message was printed in English and Suluk language, which read "Lay down your arms. Surrender, surrender, surrender!"

"We are giving them a chance and if they still insist on staying put, we will have no choice but to take an aggressive approach," Hamza said, adding that the situation was calm and there were no incidents of shooting yesterday.

Hamza said the bodies of the 12 intruders, who were killed in a shoot-out yesterday, were still at the scene.

"We are retrieving the bodies but we have to be careful."

The shoot-out on Friday morning

claimed the lives of Inspector Zulkifli Mamat, 28, and Corporal Sabarudin Daud, 47. Three security personnel were injured while 12 Sulu gunmen were killed.

Earlier, Corporal Awang Suradi Awang Wang, 43, from the General Operations Force Battalion 17, related how he went to the scene of the shooting to retrieve the bodies of the two policemen.

Awang Suradi, a Sarawakian who has been based in Felda Sahabat for almost 15 years, said he was assigned to retrieve the bodies as he knew the area well.

He said he could not control his emotions when he saw the bodies of his comrades.

"They were shot in the head. I recited some prayers before dragging the bodies to my Land Rover. I felt angry. I tied their hands over their

chests, wrapped the bodies and took them to Lahad Datu hospital.

"I do not know the two well, but when the honour of our country is at stake, we are all brothers fighting for the same cause."

Awang Suradi said even though he was angry with the Sulu intruders, he felt they, too, deserved a proper burial.

"But that will mean risking your life going back as the Sulu snipers are still around."

Awang Suradi also said there were women among the dead Sulu invaders. Some were in army fatigues while others were in civilian clothes.

It was learnt that after Friday's shoot-out, the security forces pushed the Sulu intruders 6km further into their hideout, tightening the cordon around them.

One cop killed in Semporna shoot-out

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LAHAD DATU: A policeman was shot dead and two others wounded in a gun battle with armed men in Kampung Sri Jaya Siminul, Semporna, about 130km from here, yesterday.

Sabah Police Commissioner Datuk Hamza Taib said a team of police had entered the village about 7pm looking for a group of men believed to be sympathisers of the intruders involved in a stand-off with security forces here.

The police team was ambushed and the gunmen then escaped, he said. However, he did not release the names of the deceased or the wounded.

It was unclear how badly wounded the two other policemen were.

Hamza, however, denied rumours that Semporna was under curfew.

"The situation in Semporna is under control and policemen are still there to hunt down the intruders who have escaped," he said at Felda Residence Sahabat yesterday.

The Semporna incident led to rumours on Twitter and Facebook alleging that the Semporna police station was under attack.

Hamza also dismissed this, saying he had spoken to the district police chief, who denied the rumours.

"I urge the public not to spread such rumours, or unconfirmed details, which could cause panic."

For now, all is quiet in Lahad Datu

NST - 3/3/2013

It was the night before Valentine's Day when I received instructions from my bureau chief to pack my things as I was being sent to Lahad Datu the following morning.

I had no idea what was happening and the only information I had was a group of armed Filipinos had entered Felda Sahabat.

I packed for a three-day, two-night stint. There was not much excitement in Lahad Datu with people going about their daily business.

We met two local journalists, who drove us to Felda Sahabat, about 110km from town.

Along the way, there were several roadblocks. We stopped at the Cenderawasih police station in Sahabat 7 to get more information and was told that the action was in Kampung Tanduo.

My first course of action was to go to Kampung Tanduo and speak to villagers. Little did I know they had been evacuated and that an armed group, who identified themselves as the Royal Sulu Army, had taken shel-

ter in the isolated coastal village.

It was already 5.30pm when our two-vehicle convoy entered a dirt road, a short cut from Tanjung Labian to Kampung Tanduo.

The drive was uneventful, although bumpy. We met several villagers, who pointed us in the right direction. We then came to a junction where I saw a house and two men, clad in camouflage pants, carrying buckets of water from a nearby well.

As we approached, a man who was seated outside the house stood up. Several others, clad in army fatigues, began emerging from the village. Some were also carrying firearms. I noticed a green, white and yellow flag, and it hit me, we had encountered the armed Filipino group.

Our media friends from the other vehicle ahead of us were about 20m away from the house. They immediately stopped while we put our vehicle in reverse. There was a mo-

ment of silence when another man approached the lead vehicle and asked the media to "wait" before signalling us to leave the area.

We left and decided to keep quiet about it. The next day we were taken by the police to an observation post where we were told that the security forces knew about our presence in the village, and had been instructed to look for us.

Since then, all access points into Sahabat 17 have been placed under surveillance by the security forces as they monitored the movements of the group, including those who were in nearby villages such as Sinakut, Merah and Tanjung Labian.

A visit to the observation post was an eye-opener as heavily armed General Operations Force personnel were on standby. I then realised this was not a three-day, two-night stint.

The first observation post was 3km from Kampung Tanduo while the sec-

ond post ahead, which is restricted from the media, was 1km from the village.

Journalists were told that negotiations were underway between the group and police, but they were going nowhere.

For the next 10 days, I looked for Kampung Tanduo villagers who fled to Tanjung Labian and collected as much information as I could. I have been in constant contact with my sources and Sabah police commissioner Datuk Hamza Taib for updates.

On Wednesday, I got in touch with a Filipino journalist from ABS-CBN, who provided me with the phone number of the group leader, Raja Muda Azzimuddin Kiram. I interviewed him over the telephone through a Suluk translator. We were told that the group would stay put and had no intention to retreat.

About 9pm on Thursday, Hamza told me that the security forces were moving closer to the group and that several shots were fired at the security personnel, who did not retaliate. Hamza assured me that

nothing was going to happen that night but to be prepared.

On Friday, I received a call from my source about 10.30am that there was exchange of gunfire between security forces and the Sulu intruders.

By 11am, we could see police, ambulance and civil defence vehicles speeding towards Kampung Tanduo. We stopped at a junction leading to the observation post and waited for further developments.

At 1.15pm, a police lorry carrying the bodies of the two police commandos drove out from the observation post. At this time we were not allowed to take any pictures. Soon after we were told to leave the area.

Hamza later that day confirmed that two men were killed while three others were injured. No one wanted to talk about what had happened.

A visit to the observation post and sub tactical headquarters yesterday around 2.30pm saw commandos and General Operations Force men on high alert. No shootings occurred yesterday and situation remained calm.



Avila Geraldine is an NST Journalist