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Red zone declared over fears of intrusion

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LAHAD DATU: A red zone has been declared in Tanjung Labian where security forces have encircled two fishing villages after reports of armed Sulu gunmen in the area.

Several fishermen, who managed to slip out just as the lockdown was enforced at Kg Tanjung Batu and Kg Tanjung Labian yesterday, claimed the armed intruders were in the homes of villagers.

But they said they were unsure if all the families of the fishermen managed to flee although hundreds were seen leaving Tanjung Labian during the wee hours of Monday.

Villagers had apparently heard someone shout *orang Suluk sudah masuk* (Sulu men are here) at about 11.30pm on Sunday.

Shortly after, they realised that a

villager known as "Mahmud" was missing and assumed that he was being held by the gunmen.

The villagers, who included the 15 families who had fled from Tanduo village after the Sulu armed group of Raja Muda Azzimudie Kiram landed on their shores on Feb 12, were now staying at Embara Budi community centre about 3km inland.

Kg Tanjung Batu is about 7km via the coast from Felda Sahabat 17 where military and the police are preparing to storm Azzimudie's group, which is still cornered at Tanduo village.

The anticipated strike sparked tension in various Sabah east coast towns and seaside villages with a large Suluk populace (Sulus in Sabah call themselves Suluk).

On the situation at Tanjung Batu village, Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Ismail Omar said police were still verifying reports emerging from the ground.

"We have received many such reports and dispatched our teams to check. Many reports turned out to be false," he said.

On the significance of the area in Tanjung Labian being declared a red zone, Ismail said: "What is important now is that the situation is under control."

Ismail dismissed speculation that several members of the security forces had been detained for treason in connection with the Simunul shooting in Semporna where suspects have been arrested.

"This is a challenging time for us.

There are many things being said which are not good but we will not be demoralised," he added.

Instead, he said morale remained high among police personnel in the wake of the killings of eight of their colleagues over the past three days.

He the general feeling among his men was the determination to see the current security situation in the state resolved.

"We have lost some men but the enemy's losses are more," he said.

Two police VAT69 commandos were killed in a skirmish at Kampung Tanduo on Friday while another six police personnel killed in an ambush in Semporna a day later.

So far, 18 gunmen have been killed in the shootouts at Kampung Tanduo and in Semporna.