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Air, ground strikes on Sulu intruders

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> Security forces secure area following three-hour offensive

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LAHAD DATU: After a three-week standoff, Malaysian security forces yesterday launched massive ground and air strikes, pounding the three locations here where armed intruders from southern Philippines were believed to be holed up.

At press time, a follow-up operation was being conducted by security forces at Kampung Tanduo.

It is yet to be established how effective the offensive was against the Sulu invaders.

Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Ismail Omar, who held a press conference at the media centre here at 4pm, said the search operations for the intruders was on-going but police and army personnel had yet to spot any of them.

"We are yet to find any bodies and there is a possibility that they could have fled and gone into hiding in the area.

"The search covers a large rugged terrain of 4km. I have ordered my men and army personnel to be cautious when performing the mopping exercise.

"It is being done very slowly to avoid any tragic incident. I do not want any more casualties involving my men or the army."

Armed Forces chief Tan Sri Zulkifeli Mohd Zin said at the same press conference that the security forces were confident there were no innocent lives lost in the latest



offensive.

Sources said the intruders were cornered on all sides of the battlefield but had made an attempt to escape by sea. They dropped the plan on sighting several marine police boats.

It is learnt that it took less than three hours for security forces to secure the area following the air strike, mortar bombing and deployment of armoured vehicle attacks on enemy positions.

Roads leading to the "battle grounds" were off limits to the public, including journalists and photographers.

Kampung Tanjung Batu and Tanjung Labian - both neighbouring villages to Kampung Tanduo - were under siege by the intruders who managed to slip in at the wee hours on Monday.

Villagers of Kampung Tanduo, who fled their homes after the Sulu gunmen intruded into their village on Feb 12, were taking refuge at both the affected villages.

At an earlier press conference, Defence Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi said three F-18 Hornets and five Hawk MiG08s of the Royal Malaysian Air Force were deployed in the air strikes.

He declined to reveal other details for tactical reasons other than disclosing that soldiers from five battalions were deployed to Lahad Datu to assist the police in the operation.

"The trust and faith placed on the police and armed forces to deal with the situation have produced favourable results. We gave them time but were forced to take offensive action as the intruders had tested our patience," he said.

He said security forces are focusing mainly on the affected areas, they are also prepared to face any such eruptions that may arise in response to the latest operation at Kampung Tanduo.

Ahmad Zahidi also said aid such as food and shelter would be rendered to the villagers of Kampung Tanduo who were displaced following the siege.

He also said that ties between the Philippine and Malaysian governments remained healthy as both nations understood that the intrusion was the work of a tiny group of people.

"We must not confuse the local Sulu people who have been living in Sabah peacefully over the years with those who make up the group of intruders. Our focus here is on the Sulu terrorists," he said.

The conflict in Sabah began when the armed intruders, supporters of the "Sultan of Sulu", Jamalul Kiram III, landed in Lahad Datu on Feb 12, claiming that the "sultan" has an ancestral right over Sabah.

More than 150 of the intruders have been holed up in Kampung Tanduo since then.

Eight police commandos have died in clashes with the intruders since last Friday.