

Manila to relay Kiram queries to Najib as 'disengagement' talks continue
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BY CLARA CHOOI

KUALA LUMPUR, March 12 — The Philippine government said today it will relay to Malaysia several questions raised by the Kiram clan soon, as parties involved in the ongoing clashes in Sabah move towards talk of possibly ending the month-long incursion.

Philippine media network ABN-CBS News said in a report this afternoon that the Kiram family had wanted some "clarification" of certain remarks made by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak on the armed conflict, which has killed 54 Sulu militants to date. The Kiram family called for a ceasefire last Thursday upon receiving reports that more of its gunmen were falling from battles with Malaysian forces but Putrajaya rejected the appeal.

Najib, in an immediate reaction, told the invaders to surrender unconditionally or face death.

It is believed that the Kirams, led by the self-styled Sulu "Sultan" Jamalul Kiram III (picture), are now mulling the possibility of withdrawing their forces from Sabah but want to know how they could go about doing it.

Philippine Interior and Local Government Secretary Mar Roxas, who met with Jamalul's brother Bantilan Esmail Kiram II yesterday, said in the ABN-CBS report that he has already informed President Benigno Aquino III of the family's queries.

He said the president subsequently directed the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) to relay the questions to Najib.

"I think that the questions are related to the Prime Minister Najib Razak's pronouncements and they wanted some clarifications. I said I will convey this to the President which I did and the President authorised DFA Secretary Albert del Rosario to convey these questions to the Malaysians as well," he was quoted as saying in the report.

Roxas further explained that his meeting with Esmail yesterday was the first step towards calling an end to the conflict, adding that he had conveyed Aquino's deep concern over the safety of the over 800,000 Filipinos residing in Sabah.

He pointed out that hundreds of Filipinos have already fled Sabah for fear of capture while hundreds more are looking for ways out, gripped with fear that they would be harmed in the crossfire between the Sulu gunmen and Malaysian security forces.

"[The President's] primordial concern is the safety of Filipinos and the livelihood of the Filipinos there. Let us separate the claim of the family from the situation that is dangerous and life-threatening and livelihood-threatening for those in Sabah," Roxas was quoted as saying in the online report.

The network added that on the part of the Sultanate, spokesman Abraham Idjirani said Esmail was yet to brief Jamalul about his meeting with Roxas.

According to several reports in the Philippine media, Roxas held a two-hour closed-door meeting in Quezon City yesterday with Esmail to discuss the "disengagement" of the Sultanate's army.

Esmail is a younger brother of Jamalul, who is one of nine claimants to the Sulu throne. Another brother, Agbimuddin Kiram, is believed to be still in hiding in Lahad Datu, Sabah, where Malaysian security forces are conducting an operation flush out the rebel group.

The first firefight between Malaysian forces and the Sulu gang started on March 1 and resulted in the death of 20 Sulu militants and eight Malaysians. The Kiram family has labelled the clash as the "March 1 massacre".

Reeling from the loss of Malaysian lives, Putrajaya launched Ops Daulat last Tuesday to flush out the rest of the Sulu invaders, sending in battalions of troops and mounting an aerial airstrike on the gunmen.

As of yesterday afternoon, the Sulu incursion in Sabah has resulted in the deaths of 63 people, including 54 Filipino militants, eight Malaysian policemen and one teenage boy.

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