

PM: Military sent in to protect Malaysia's dignity and sovereignty
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KUALA LUMPUR, March 5 — Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said the government had to take appropriate action in the defence of the nation's dignity and sovereignty as demanded by Malaysians after measures to avert bloodshed failed.

"Our security forces were attacked and killed. Malaysians, particularly those in Sabah, are worried about their safety," he said in a statement here.

Najib (picture) said the armed intruders from the southern Philippines, who claimed to be from the so-called Sulu royal army, had fired at policemen on duty in Lahad Datu last Friday, killing two of them, and then killed six more policemen in Semporna the following day.

"After the first attack, I stressed that the intruders must surrender themselves or the security authorities will have to act," he said.

Najib said that following the armed intrusion in Lahad Datu on February 9, the government adopted the approach of resolving the issue without bloodshed.

"The police held meetings and negotiations in the hope that the intruders would agree to leave peacefully without the need to take any serious legal action," he said.

Najib said Malaysia, as a peace-loving Islamic nation, wanted to resolve the issue through negotiations but the attempt to avert bloodshed in Lahad Datu failed.

"As the issue of the intrusion prolonged, it was evident to the authorities that the intruders had no intention of withdrawing from Sabah," he said.

At 7am today, the armed forces launched an attack on the Filipino intruders at Kampung Tanduo, Felda Sahabat in Lahad Datu on Sabah's east coast.

The Star Online reported that fresh fighting began between the Sulu gunmen and security forces early this morning. Soldiers are already on the ground in the village, it added.

Gunshots were heard and fighter jets were seen circling around the Felda Sahabat plantation. Explosions were heard for 40 minutes in Kampung Tanduo, the news portal reported.

The group of 200 armed men, claiming to be the Royal Sulu Sultanate Army, had landed on February 9 to revive their sultan's claim for the Borneo state.

Armed Forces Chief Gen Tan Sri Zulkifeli Mohd Zin said yesterday seven more battalions have been sent to Sabah since Saturday, with five in Lahad Datu and one each based in Sandakan and Tawau.

Zulkifeli said although the armed Filipino militants were present only in Kampung Tanduo in Lahad Datu as well as Kampung Lormalong and Kampung Dasar Lama in Kunak, security personnel were deployed to Sandakan and Tawau to provide security for residents there.

"We are collaborating with the police and their security forces to protect our country," he said.

A fleet of military trucks ferrying army personnel was spotted heading to Kampung Tanduo in Felda Sahabat, which is said to be twice the size of Singapore with its 57 plantations.

National Security Council secretary Datuk Mohamed Thajudeen Abdul Wahab told the New Straits Times that there had been an increase in the number of personnel from the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency, marine police, navy and air force patrolling and conducting surveillance over the past two days.

The Star Online reported that continuous explosions could be heard as the police and army moved in on the gunmen who are reportedly firing back.

The situation around Tanjung Labian, about 7km from Kampung Tanduo, was tense as more than 300 villagers huddled in a community hall kept on hearing the explosions.

News portal Malaysiakini reported that fleeing villagers from Kampung Sungai Merah, about 2km from the gun battle, were seen squeezed onto lorries, with close to 50 of them on each vehicle leaving the area.

The Star Online also reported that fighter jets screamed over Kampung Tanduo, followed by artillery fire. At least six continuous explosions were heard and journalists at the Sahabat 16 resort said the jets looped back flying low.

It also reported that military trucks were seen going into the battle field. Elite military and police squads were also on the ground and believed to be involved in shootouts with the Filipino militants.

In Lahad Datu, about 120km from the battle field, preparations are being made at the main hospital to receive casualties.

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