

For Immediate Release

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The NGOs call for the Establishment of the Royal Commission on ESSCOM and Hostage Crisis Management

We, the following organizations, calls for the establishment of a Royal Commission of Inquiry to probe the effectiveness of Eastern Sabah Security Zone (ESSZONE) and hostage crisis management in Sabah, following the latest mishandling of the “Sibu 4” hostage crisis which involves public and family contribution of RM 12 million.

While we cheer for the release and safety of the hostages, the whereabouts of the RM 12 million has been given so many contradictory statements by the authorities:

- June 9: IGP Khalid Abu Bakar claimed that no ransom was paid
<http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2016/06/09/igp-no-ransom-paid-for-release-of-abductees/>
- June 16: the families claimed that they have handed over the RM 12 million to the police
https://www.yahoo.com/news/m/6296cdae-30f2-3c75-b2e0-6fff0c261c17/ss_we-raised-rm12-million-ransom.html?nhp=1
- June 16: DPM cum Home Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi claimed that the RM 12 million was donated to some Islamic charities in the Philippines
<https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/345535>
- June 17: IGP Khalid Abu Bakar denied that the police have received the RM 12 million
<http://m.todayonline.com/world/asia/malaysian-police-deny-handling-rm12m-ransom-abducted-sarawakians>

Who is telling the truth, the home minister or the IGP? The outright refusal of the IGP yesterday to investigate the channelling of the RM12 million in public donations to a Philippines organization will only reinforces public suspicions of an attempt of cover-up.

To make matters worse, a Philippines newspaper reported that the Abu Sayyaf claimed to have only received RM8.8 million, raising suspicions that the rebels may be in cahoots with government officials from Malaysia and the Philippines, who may have shared the missing money of RM3.2 million among themselves.
<https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/345924#ixzz4C6big5kh>

The contradictory statements have unfortunately raised questions of accountability and integrity not only on the authorities, but earlier also the families which have suffered emotionally because of the ordeal itself. One of the families even sold their two houses in order to save the lives of their loved ones.

The Home Minister's "donation" claim is neither sensible nor acceptable on two grounds.

1. The money was raised from the public and does not belong to the police. Hence, the police have no right to channel the money for other purposes.
2. Calling the transfer of money as "donation" and channelled it to "a body in the Philippines which assists in an Islamic struggle" is legitimising the kidnapping of civilians by the Abu Sayaff terrorists.

If this is a poor camouflage of payment of ransom, it shows the Government has failed twice as compared to other governments who paid to secure the release of their citizens kidnapped by terrorists.

First, the Government failed to assist the hostage families, leading to the need for them to raise fund publicly and complicating the matter. In other countries, ransom is paid by government or public enterprises with broad consensus across political parties.

Second, when publicly-raised fund is used and accountability is expected, the government has left the families to answer the public query and eventually came out with contradictory statements now leading to speculations if the ransom money has been misappropriated. The government must be reminded that hostage taking is a crime under the 1979 International Convention against the Taking Hostages, while the 1999 International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism establishes terrorists financing as an offence. Has our government committed an offence of financing terrorist by channelling money to an undisclosed allegedly "charitable organization" in the Philippines? Even more fundamental and pertinent question to be asked, whether such payment, be it ransom or "donation", is helping in fighting against the terrorists in the long run or making the terrorists more stronger with bigger appetite for hostage taking?

This entire fiasco is itself indicative of the weakness of our marine defence in Sabah. Clearly, the ESSZONE which was launched on 25 March 2013 and cost Malaysians RM 1.3 billion so far has not been effective. <http://www.theheatmalaysia.com/Main/RM12-million-and-RM1-3-billion>

Less than half a year before the kidnapping of the Sibu 4 hostages on April 2, another Sarawakian Bernard Thein was beheaded by Abu Sayaff in November. He was kidnapped while dining in a Sandakan restaurant on May 15, 2015. <http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2015/11/17/bernard-then-killed-abu-sayyaf/>

On 6 May 2014, a Chinese national, Yang Zailin, was kidnapped from a fish farm in Lahad Datu's Silam, Sabah. <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2014/05/06/another-kidnap-in-sabah/>

On 2 April 2014, a Chinese female tourist, Gao Huayun and a Filipino were kidnapped at the Singgahmata Hotel, Sabah.

<http://www.scmp.com/news/asia/article/1463606/chinese-tourist-malaysian-hotel-employee-kidnapped-sabah>

These cases called into question the effectiveness of the ESSCOM. An RCI is necessary to look at both how to improve our marine security and handling of hostage crisis in Sabah.

It needs to study how the threat of hostage-for-money terrorism can be curbed, by not just improving our military and police surveillance, but also through international cooperation and religious preaching against deviant teaching that kidnapping civilians for money is acceptable. Malaysians cannot be treated as ATM machines by terrorists with some “charity body” as their agent.

With regards to the management of the Sibu 4 crisis, the RCI can establish facts, clear the air and restore public confidence in the home ministry and the police that there was no foul play and complicity of Malaysian officials in the management of the hostage crisis and the ransom money.

Both the home minister and the IGP should be suspended pending the investigation by the royal commission of inquiry.

Endorsed by:

1. Persatuan Aliran Kesedaran Malaysia (ALIRAN)
2. Anak Muda Sarawak (AMS)
3. All Women’s Action Society (AWAM)
4. BERSIH 2.0
5. Centre to Combat Corruption and Cronyism (C4)
6. ENGAGE
7. Institute for Development of Alternative Living (IDEAL)
8. Pertubuhan IKRAM Malaysia (IKRAM)
9. Islamic Renaissance Front (IRF)
10. JIHAD for JUSTICE (JFJ)
11. Jaringan Orang Asal SeMalaysia (JOAS)
12. Kumpulan Aktivis Mahasiswa Independen (KAMI)
13. Kuala Lumpur and Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall (KLSCAH)
14. Pusat Komang (KOMAS)
15. Komuniti Muslim Universal (KMU) Malaysia
16. Persatuan Bekas Siswazah Universiti dan Kolej di China, Malaysia (LiuHua)
17. LLG Cultural Development Centre (LLG)
18. Malaysian Indian Progressive Association (MIPAS)
19. Majlis Perundingan Malaysian Agama Buddha, Kritisian , Hindu, Sikh dan Tao (MCCBCHST)
20. Malaysian Indians Transformation Action Team (MITRA)
21. National Indian Rights Action Team (NIAT)
22. Negeri Sembilan Chinese Assembly Hall (NSCAH)
23. Oriental Hearts and Mind Study Institute (OHMSI)
24. Partners in Community Organising (Pacos Trust), Sabah.
25. Persatuan Masyarakat Sel dan Wilayah Persekutuan (PERMAS)
26. Malaysian Youth Care Association (PRIHATIN)
27. Federation of Malaysian Indian Organisation (PRIMA)

28. Persatuan Rapat Malaysia (RAPAT)
29. Rise of Sarawak Efforts (ROSE)
30. Saya Anak Bangsa Malaysia (SABM)
31. Sabah Women's Action Resource Group (SAWO)
32. Suara Rakyat Malaysia (SUARAM)
33. United Chinese School Alumni Associations of Malaysia (UCSAAM)
34. Tamil Foundation (TF)
35. Tindak Malaysia
36. Angkatan Warga Aman Malaysia (Warga AMAN)
37. WE ARE MALAYSIANS
38. Women Development of Malaysia PJ Branch