

Indonesians abducted in Sabah

Three fishermen taken by gunman in high-security waters

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KOTA KINABALU: Abu Sayyaf-linked kidnap-for-ransom militants have again intruded into Sabah waters amidst a massive Philippine military crackdown on their bastion, Jolo.

This time, they made off with three Indonesians.

Five armed men, one of them seen in military fatigues, slipped into the high-security waters of Tunku in Sabah's east coast Lahad Datu district to grab the three fishermen from a Malaysian-owned trawler just before midnight on Saturday.

The abductors, however, let off four other crew members – three Pelahus (sea gypsies or Bajau Laut) and an Indonesian – before fleeing towards the Tawi-Tawi chain of islands bordering Sabah.

The incident occurred 3.6 nautical miles from Kampung Sinakut, one of the closest points between Sabah's east coast and Tawi-Tawi islands of Sitangkai and Sibutu.

Sabah Police Commissioner Datuk Abdul Rashid Harun said security agencies under the Eastern Sabah Security Command (Esscom) had launched a hunt for the group and informed their Filipino counterparts after receiving word about the incident at about 4am.

It could not be ascertained which group was behind the latest kidnapping although suspicion fell on Apo Mike, who was responsible for several recent kidnappings involving sailors on tugboats plying international waters along the Sabah-Philippines border.

Rashid said according to initial reports, the five armed men on a white speedboat pulled up near the Malaysian-registered tugboat before abducting the crewmen.

Three of the suspects bearing M14 and M16 rifles then boarded the tugboat and ordered all of the crew members (four Indonesians and three Pelahus) to gather on the bow, he said.

"The gunmen asked for their passports and took the three Indonesians while the three Pelahus and Indonesian who did not have any documents were let off," he said, adding that no shots were fired.

The suspects, who spoke broken Malay, also seized the special permit to be in curfew zones during curfew hours, six hand-phones and the boat licence card before fleeing.

The abducted Indonesians were Timorese. They have been identified as Lorence Koten, 34, Teo Dorus Kopong, 42, and Emanuel, 46.

Rashid said based on the description given by the freed men, the suspects were in their 30s or 40s. One of them was clad in army fatigues.

"The employer has not received any call for ransom," he added.

Meanwhile, Philippine sources believed the abductors were heading towards Jolo but there were no official reports of any landing.

The latest kidnapping comes just as the Philippine military launched a massive crackdown against Abu Sayyaf in Jolo and Basilan, with thousands of troops being deployed to neutralise the notorious group.