

STATEMENT OF  
HIS EXCELLENCY BENIGNO S. AQUINO III  
PRESIDENT OF THE PHILIPPINES  
ON THE SABAH INCIDENT

I address you today about the incident that is now taking place in Sabah, allegedly under the leadership of Prince Rajah Mudah Agbimuddin Kiram. Our relations with Malaysia have always been colored by the issue of Sabah—an issue that has persisted for over half a century. This issue is complex: from the basis of our claim, to the question of the rightful heirs, and even involving the translation of documents from an era when our grandparents weren't even born.

This incident involves approximately 180 people, twenty to thirty of whom are armed. Having an armed group in Lahad Datu presents a challenge that the Malaysian authorities cannot ignore. From the outset of this incident, our primary consideration has always been to protect all lives. Secretary del Rosario had already reached an agreement with Malaysian Foreign Minister Anifah that this issue should be resolved in a peaceful manner.

Our armed forces and police have been actively communicating with their Malaysian counterparts to peacefully resolve the situation. Other agencies of government have also been tasked to prepare for any contingencies that could potentially affect our citizens. For example, the Philippine and Malaysian Navies have worked together to prevent other groups from entering Lahad Datu. From the three extensions of the deadline given by Malaysia, to the constant coordination as events unfolded, our efforts have not ceased.

Apart from this, we have also sent a number of emissaries to the Kiram family to ask them to convince the group in Lahad Datu to return home peacefully. In fact, there is a humanitarian ship with social workers and medical officers on board nearby to facilitate the peaceful departure of those in Lahad Datu.

What is clear is that a peaceful resolution of this issue is to everybody's interest. Even if we assume, for the sake of argument, that there are legitimate grievances, the presence of an armed group in Lahad Datu will only bring us further away from resolving these issues.

Let me say to Sultan Jamalul Kiram III: I have just been made aware that a letter to me, from you, was sent through OPAPP in the very first weeks of my term, when we were organizing the government. Unfortunately, this letter was lost in the bureaucratic maze. Let me make clear that there was no intention to ignore your letter. Knowing this now, will you let your mistaken belief dictate your course of action?

The avenue of peaceful and open dialogue is still available to us. Let us therefore sit down as brothers to address your grievances in a peaceful, calm manner according to our laws and according to correct processes when your people arrive home.

And so this is my appeal to you: These are your people, and it behooves you to recall them. It must be clear to you that this small group of people will not succeed in addressing your grievances, and that there is no way that force can achieve your aims.

You are a leader of your clan, and every leader seeks the well-being of his constituents. These times require you to use your influence to prevail on our countrymen to desist from this hopeless cause.

The action of these people purporting to be your followers, endangers more than just their own lives. They also put at risk our countrymen peacefully engaged in their livelihood in Sabah. These are hundreds of thousands of individuals. Their families, dependent on their wages, are likewise being made to suffer. Filipinos residing in Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi, who trade

with Sabah, have had their commerce disrupted. Most of these people are your fellow Muslims. This is a situation that cannot persist. If you are truly the leader of your people, you should be one with us in ordering your followers to return home peacefully. As President and chief executor of our laws, I have tasked an investigation into possible violations of laws by you, your followers, and collaborators engaged in this foolhardy act. May I remind you as well that as a citizen of the Republic, you are bound by the constitution and its laws. Among your possible violations is Article II Section 2 of the Constitution, which states that the Philippines renounces war as an instrument of national policy, the enabling law of which is Article 118 of the Revised Penal Code, which punishes those who “provoke or give occasion for a war...or expose Filipino citizens to reprisals on their persons or property.”[1] Thus, you are now fully aware of the consequences of your actions.

We have not yet reached the point of no return, but we are fast approaching that point. My duty is very clear: it is to protect the interests of all of our people, and if that is not possible, then to do what will redound to the interests of the greatest majority. This is the time to demonstrate that you are a true leader both in name and deed. The right thing to do now would be to order your followers to return home as soon as possible. The choices and consequences are yours. If you choose not to cooperate, the full force of the laws of the state will be used to achieve justice for all who have been put in harm’s way.