

An Analysis on the Aftermath of Lahad Datu Incursion

Siti Nur Azilayati Rahmah Raman¹
Mohd Adnan Hashim²

Centre for Media and Information Warfare Studies
Faculty of Communication and Media Studies
Universiti Teknologi MARA
40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, MALAYSIA

sitinurazilayati@gmail.com¹, adnanh7@yahoo.com²

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ABSTRACT

The 2013 Lahad Datu incursion has steered the establishment security zones by the Malaysian government aimed at securing the safety of Sabah's eastern sea border. These are the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) and the Eastern Sabah Security Zone (ESSZONE) comprising a total of 10 districts. The question that arise is how effective is the security of ESSCOM in ensuring the safety of citizens living in ESSZONE since there are still occurrences of kidnapping especially with the recent case of kidnapping in Tambisan of which the Abu Sayyaf group from southern Philippines were said to be the suspects. This study seeks to investigate the awareness of residents living in the east coast of Sabah ESSCOM towards the accomplishments of the authorities in securing the safety of Sabah's eastern seaboard. Additionally, it is aimed at exploring the security issues relating to the safety of the said seaboard. Besides this, this study also intends to identify security improvements with regards to the safety of the area. Data for the study was gathered via in-depth interviews with selected participants by using purposive sampling. The researchers utilised thematic analysis and computing applications made for qualitative research, the Atlas.ti for data analyses process. Results of the study indicate that ESSCOM is a relevant organization to protect the east coast of Sabah. Readers can gain a lot of knowledge from the various summarised opinions and comments made by participants, in relation to the threats and challenges in securing safety as well as ways of security improvements on the east coast of Sabah.

Keywords: awareness, eastern seaboard, ESSCOM, improvement, Sabah, security issues

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Sabah is home to Southeast Asia's highest mountain, Mount Kinabalu, a popular tourist spot and main attraction among tourists and explorers throughout the world. Located in north Borneo, it is also known as the "land below the wind". Its territory borders Sarawak state towards the southwest and Indonesia's Kalimantan area towards the south. This state has been perceived as one of a kind for the variety of cultures, ethnicities and dialects that the Sabahans are proud of. Not to mention, the beauty of its shorelines and crystal clear waters attract nature lovers from all around the globe.

Regrettably, the tranquillity of Sabah was triggered by an incident that occurred in February 2013, where a group of 200 Filipino terrorist fighters, known as Royal Sulu Force (RSF) intruded Lahad Datu, one of the districts in Sabah's eastern seaboard, for the purpose of claiming Sabah as their land. Despite the initial negotiation by the Royal Malaysian Police (RMP) with RSF, the effort failed as fights broke up and caused RMP to launch its attack on the terrorists. The Malaysian security forces killed 68 members of the RSF terrorist group and prosecuted 30 of their members and sympathisers.

During the Lahad Datu incursion, Sabahans especially those who lived on the east coast were living in fear of being the terrorists' targets. Many of them had confined themselves in their house, doing less outdoor activities. Since the occurrence of attack in Tanduo Village and Sri Jaya Simunul in Semporna which had sacrificed 10 Malaysian soldiers, children were even forbidden to go to school by their parents. The traumatic incident left a huge impact on the Sabahans as they no longer felt secure and safe.

The incident was seen as a wake-up call for Malaysia to strengthen its border security to avoid any internal or external threats towards the country. The largest area of 1,733.7 kilometres from Kudat to Tawau was most exposed to these threats. This dangerous state of affairs demands the authorities to develop new and effective strategies in order to be well prepared for the reoccurrence of such episode in the future. It clearly indicates that full cooperation from the surrounding community was critical for the security forces to wholly understand the geography of Sabah such that possible hiding locations of the terrorists could be precisely tracked.

It is important to note that the Lahad Datu incursion was not the first major case involving national security. Back in 1985, our national security force was triggered by a comparatively less severe incident than the 2013 episode which involved office shootings and robbery of Standard Chartered Bank and Malaysia Airlines (MAS) office in the town of Lahad Datu [1]. Due to this previous history

of dangerous attacks, Malaysia needs to improve the national security status from all aspects. As a precaution, it is crucial to identify looming threats and security breaches that would affect the safety and security of the nation.

Overall, the purpose of this study is to have an insight of Malaysian national security focussing on the east coast of Sabah area after the incident of the Lahad Datu incursion. It is an opportunity to examine in detail the situations in Sabah and consequently act on preventing any possibility of the second wave of intrusion in the future.

1.1 Problem Statement

In February 2013, Malaysia particularly Sabah was at a standstill. The roughly 200 member armed terrorist group of the RSF from southern Philippines had attacked Tandou Village of Felda Sahabat in Lahad Datu, Sabah to reclaim Sabah from Malaysia [2]. The episode had likewise driven us to question the safety of our national security especially in Sabah's eastern seaboard [3]. Dollah and Pangkas [4] also mentioned that the Lahad Datu incursion had shown how non-state actor is considered less important in the research even though "security" actually plays a huge role in understanding national security.

The incursion has led to the establishment of ESSCOM and the security zone, ESSZONE covering 10 districts, namely Kudat, Kota Marudu, Pitas, Beluran, Sandakan, Kinabatangan, Lahad Datu, Kunak, Semporna and Tawau. The formation of ESSCOM and ESSZONE is aimed at ensuring the safety of citizens in Sabah's eastern sea border subsequent to the incursion in Lahad Datu.

Dollah and Suharani [5] stated that ESSCOM was considered by the ESSZONE community as a mechanism that can help secure the safety of people living in the border areas. However, there were still some sections of the community and those within Sabah state who doubted the effectiveness of ESSCOM since there were still incidences of kidnapping in the east coast of Sabah. The most recent was on 18 June 2019 when 10 undocumented fishermen called Pala'u (sea gypsies) aged between 17 and 60 years old were kidnapped in the territorial waters of Tambisan in Lahad Datu. It is therefore a cause for concern for the people living in the surrounding areas. This grave situation is another concern why some people were questioning the effectiveness of the ESSCOM in ensuring their safety from foreign aggressors. As such, this study is conducted to find out the perception of citizens living in the East Coast of Sabah on the effectiveness of ESSCOM to safeguard the ESSZONE community.

According to Jawhar and Sariburaja [1], the dangers in Sabah's eastern seaboard were not just posed by the RSF but also by organized crime groups and other terrorist groups in the Southern Philippines. The Abu Sayyaf group can be considered as the strongest threat to the safety of the east coast of Sabah as they have their camp base in Jolo Island of Sulu in Southern Philippines. In 2019, this group of assailants were the suspected kidnapers of 10 undocumented fishermen who were brought to Sitangkai Island in Southern Philippines. Therefore this study hopes to discover various issues related to the threats in Sabah's eastern seaboard.

Hussein [6] mentioned that Sabah is located close to the neighbouring countries of Indonesia and Phippines, which in turn could leave it vulnerable to numerous security threats. This statement was also supported by Jawhar and Sariburaja [1] since the existence of endless layer of dangers and difficulties have made it more challenging than ever to secure the safety within the wide area of 1,733.7 kilometres from Kudat to Tawau. In a 2019 interview, Datuk Omar Mammah, Commissioner of Sabah Police stated that during the kidnap case of 10 fishermen on 18th June 2019, the attackers were well-trained as it took them only 15 minutes to reach Tambisan, Lahad Datu from Jolo island, Sulu.

Also, undocumented individuals such as the illegal immigrants and the Pala'u refused to follow the rules imposed by the ESSCOM and this situation posed another challenge for ESSCOM in their effort to secure safety of the sea border. Another point to note is that the 2019 kidnapping incident occurred because the Pala'u community broke the curfew hours in the ESSZONE. Even worse, the locals were also suspected to be involved in helping them to enter Sabah's sea border.

Nevertheless, be it local or not, people living on the east coast of Sabah were facing the danger of becoming victims of this terrorist group from southern Philippines. As it stands, with the close distance to the Philippines and Indonesia, the east coast of the Sabah area in particular, is open to threats of national security . This study hopes to enlighten readers on the challenges faced by the authorities in taking care and securing the nation's borderline from any possible threats.

This study will useful for the people of Sabah to learn about safety measures, specifically around the coastlines. It also provides opportunities for other Malaysians and foreigners to understand the current state of Sabah with regard to safety issues. Clearly, the Sabah incursions, including the recent kidnapping incident affects the national safety of Sabah state. There is no denying that Sabah's eastern sea border safety status is still unstable. Therefore, it is quite appropriate to investigate the situations

occurring in Sabah which could lead to a deplorable state of affairs. By conducting this study, the researchers attempt to comprehend the national security situation on the east coast of Sabah after the Lahad Datu incursion in 2013.

1.2 Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to explore the effectiveness of Malaysia's national security focusing on the east coast of Sabah after the Lahad Datu incursion in 2013. Therefore, the specific objectives of this study are:

1. To investigate the awareness of citizens living in the east coast of Sabah on the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) in securing the safety of Sabah's eastern seaboard.
2. To study the security issues relating to safety of Sabah's eastern seaboard.
3. To identify ways of improvement in securing the safety of Sabah's eastern seaboard.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Security Issues in Safeguarding National Security

Security is a high concern for all countries around the world. It involves the nation's survival to determine the country's safety. Although non-state actors are seen as less important in security research as suggested by traditionalist scholars, Malaysia's experience in facing threats from Royal Sulu Force (RSF) during the Lahad Datu incursion in 2013 clearly shows that the threats posed by non-state actor groups greatly affected security of the country [3], [4], [7]. According to Englehart [8], there are "around 232 non-state armed groups in twenty-three Asian countries from 1985 to 2014".

Free from threats is an important keyword in national security, but the threats that come from internal and external factors would make citizens consider their country's national security as not in good condition. With the existence of terrorist groups in the southern Philippines, this grave situation calls for Malaysia to always stay alert with the threats of terrorism. These groups do not just have the potential to attack the country but could also spread their radical ideology which could affect the minds of many Malaysians. This is clearly evidenced with the arrest in 2018 of a few suspects of a pro-Daesh terrorist group comprising mostly Malaysian

citizens with two from the Philippines believed to be linked with Daesh and Abu Sayyaf groups [9].

Hussein [6] explained that since Malaysia is located on a strategic location in the centre of Southeast Asia, the close borderline between her neighbours makes it more challenging as there is a lot of areas that need monitoring. As for the east coast of Sabah which comprise a large span of 1,733.7 kilometres from Kudat to Tawau, it can be quite a demanding mission for the authorities to carry out surveillance and secure the borderline [10], [11], [3]. More so, the geographic nature of Sabah is easily accessible for outsiders to pass in via its eastern coastline which would subsequently distress Malaysia's national security.

Samuni, Kanyo and Rahman [10] posited that the extremely wide maritime area as far as geology has a high challenge to law implementation organizations. Certainly, it would be gruelling to command and ensure safety of the sea zone against any criminal elements that can meddle with an open request, particularly to individuals living in the encompassing vicinity. Despite the heightened security, individuals regularly discussed on news regarding security issues in jeopardy, as detailed in the media. This situation invites a feeling of stress leading to sentiments of uncertainty emerging with regard to the degree of network wellbeing and the capacity of law authorization organizations intending to battle wrongdoings from occurring [10].

Rashid [12] stated that Lahad Datu's incursion is seen as a major challenge in preserving the well-being of the lives of Suluk community as the intrusion is directly linked to the Suluk community. The much publicised kidnap incident clearly defamed and undermined their social welfare in the eyes of the other surrounding communities. This state of affairs has impacted negatively on their image as a weak ethnic group. On this issue, Shamsuddin, Liaw and Ridzuan [13] explained that solidarity, harmony and unity between the ethnic groups in the area concerned is crucial for the country's stability since ethnic issues can affect the peace and harmony of a state or country. With the existence of a segment of the local population who had been assisting illegal immigrants into Sabah, this situation could certainly affect the national security. As it stands, it is everybody's duty, from the leader, security personnel to the local communities to safeguard the state's borders not only from the illegal immigrants but also from traitors who help these unwanted guests into the state.

The invasion of Datu invasion changed the Malaysian government's security and enforcement procedures in managing the cross-border migration and many cross-border activities, especially on cases of

cross-border kidnapping, smuggling and other crimes between the Southern Philippines and Sabah [10] [11]. The government needed to take great strides to improve the national security as internal or external hazards could appear from any corner. Indeed, Malaysia needs to learn from previous untoward incidents. The latest happening in Lahad Datu acts as a glaring reason to transform our national security into a new level of security fortification against invaders and immigrants.

Tajari and Affendi [14] mentioned that, if not properly controlled, illegal migration is a developing scenario which could unfavourably influence the strength and security of the destination country. In reference to the situation in Sabah, the number of illegal immigrants from Philippines and Indonesia to the state is on a steady increase [15]. The primary reason for this illegal influx is due to financial motives as they see better opportunities for employment compared to their home countries. With the presence of appealing force factors, Sabah is and will always become the destination for illegal immigrants. Also, the political and economic instability in the southern Philippines could become another strong reason as it would be difficult to have a comfortable life when there is little job opportunities in the unstable area of their country.

2.2 Defending the Country's Maritime Sovereignty

According to Dimitriadi [16], the external borders and particularly the sea borders attract our attention right up until the present time, basically in light of the fact that they show us over and over how porous our border is where we can see the boats and we see the people. Hunter [17, p1] stated that *"If land and sea borders are the nation's doors, Malaysia's doors seem wide open. Terrorism, piracy, smuggling, narcotics trade, human trafficking, and illegal immigrants are all major problems that need to be tackled at the country's boundaries"*.

Hj Sutarji [18] pointed out that Malaysia's sea territory is gigantic, vital and of financial significance. It is imperative to ensure safety and protect fisheries, seaward and gas ventures and the marine condition, to control the flood of illegal immigrants and to battle sea burglary. It is additionally significant that marine exercises in the sea zones be controlled, overseen and managed, with the goal that these exercises are completed securely and the ocean assets economically misused and used. Likewise, the sovereignty of these sea zones must be protected for the nation's stability and peace.

From the land to sea, there is such a huge border that needs to be taken care of by the nation's security forces. Malaysia's total sea area is

614,159 square kilometres, almost twice its land area and the size of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) alone is 453,186 square kilometres [19]. In the east coast of Sabah itself, from Kudat to Tawau there is 1733.7 kilometres with a large area of 100,000 square kilometres that contains 486 islands [20]. This shows the difficult task for the security forces to manage the sea border since there is a huge need for the protection of those living nearby.

It is important to note that ESSCOM is an authoritative body that oversees the ESSZONE and within ESSCOM there are three main agencies working together in securing the safety in the east coast of Sabah, namely the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF), Royal Malaysian Police (RMP) and Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA). These agencies can be considered as the backbone of ESSCOM. Without these agencies, it will be hard for ESSCOM to be able to accomplish its function as an authoritative body that oversees the ESSZONE. These agencies have their own specialties that strengthen Malaysia's national sea border.

Inside MAF, obviously, the one responsible for defending Malaysia's sea sovereignty is the Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN). For the east coast of Sabah, the naval base protecting the area from Kudat to Tawau is the Naval Area Two under the leadership of its Rear Admiral as the commander. The RMN also works together with other components of MAF, the Malaysian Army and the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) in securing the safety of the east coast of Sabah.

Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agencies (MMEA) is also part of the team under ESSCOM. There are 18 districts under the supervision of MMEA. Their functions are varied and encompass the enforcement of law and order under any federal law, performance of maritime search and rescue, preventing offenses in the Malaysian Maritime Zone and lending assistance in criminal matters request by a foreign country as provided under the Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters Act 2002 (Act 621).

Other than these tasks, they also carry out coastal and air surveillance, to prepare a platform for service and support for relevant agencies, establish and manage maritime institutions for training, perform any obligation to ensure maritime safety and security or undertake all matters incidental to its control and prevent ocean pollution, piracy and illicit trafficking of narcotic drugs on the high seas. This team is placed under the control of the MAF during a period of special crisis emergency or war [21].

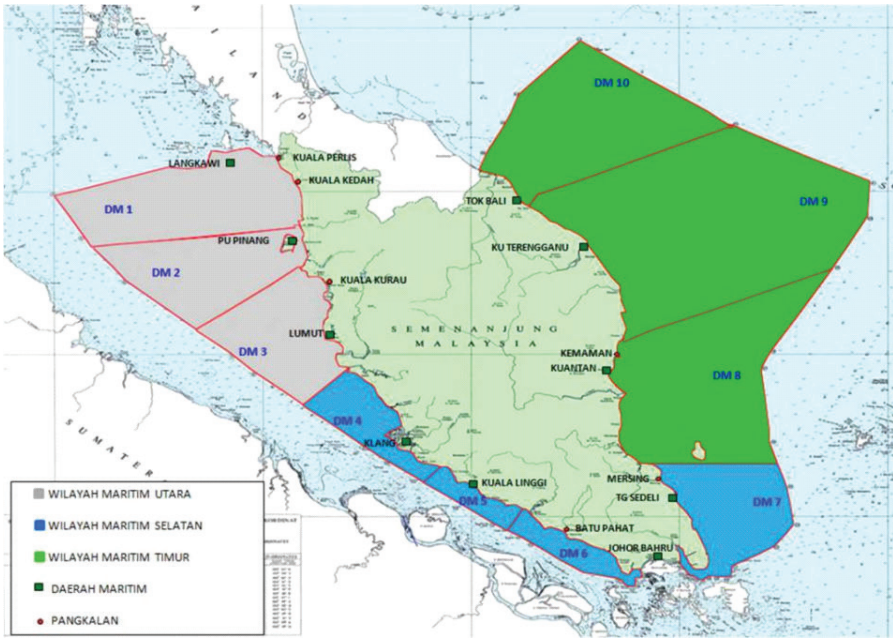


Figure 1 Maritime Zone of West Malaysia (Source: Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency)

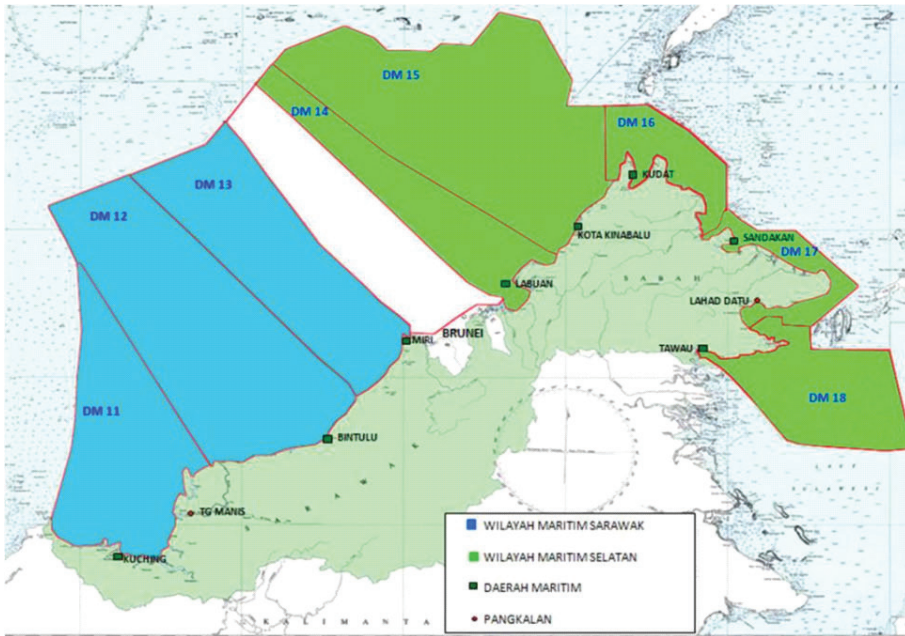


Figure 2 Maritime Zone of East Malaysia (Source: Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency)

The Royal Malaysian Police (RMN) is also one of the agencies under ESSCOM that helps to secure safety on the east coast of Sabah. They played a major role during the Lahad Datu incursion because they negotiated with the RSF to surrender to Malaysian authorities. RMN and MAF were a joint force during the incursion to defend the country from RSF. To strengthen the security in land, sea and air on the east coast of Sabah, RMN conducted many operations such as *Op Gasak*, *Op Gasak Laut*, *Op Bersepadu* and “Road Check Point” (RCP) in the ESSZONE area [22].

Besides the joint-operation by all agencies under ESSCOM, there is a need for our country to strengthen cooperation with neighbouring countries such as Philippines and Indonesia. As stated by Keling *et al.* [23] “*Malaysia’s security is a part of the ASEAN nation’s security. Therefore, any threat on ASEAN nations is also viewed as a threat to Malaysia*” (pg. 185). This statement is proof that the security cooperation between ASEAN countries needs to be improved for the safety of the Southeast Asian region.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The purpose of this study is to study issues on national security after the Lahad Datu incursion and its impact on Malaysia’s security. As for the instrument, this study was conducted by using the qualitative method of which the data were collected using in-depth interviews as a technique. Guest, Namey, and Mitchell [24] said that basically, all qualitative analysts utilize this method as it is a flexible source of information with regard to the scope of study points. The in-depth interview technique is superb for gathering data that requires deep understanding. A semi-structured interview protocol made up of open-ended questions which define the area to be explored is used such that the participants could express their views in their own terms. The process of formulating the semi-structured questions entails viewing and identifying data sources from past research and literature such as academic books, journals, newspaper articles online and other documents that might have information on national security related to Lahad Datu incursion. These materials were reviewed to ensure the questions posed would be relevant for the study’s purpose.

3.2 Sampling Technique and Data Collection

The participants for the study were selected based on their knowledge, expertise or experience living in the security ESSZONE on the east

coast of Sabah as their viewpoints and comments about the real situation were deemed relevant. To understand and analyse the circumstances of the safety and security of ESSZONE, the researchers reviewed past research and news related to the security in Sabah. To recap, the fundamental purpose of this study is to have an insight of national security after the incident of Lahad Datu incursion.

Purposive sampling was used in this research in order to identify the most suitable participants to be interviewed. This type of sampling engages the researchers to choose participants based on the consideration of who are appropriate for the interviews since they serve the purpose of the study. A total of 10 participants were interviewed comprising five (5) civilians and five (5) members of the security force in ESSZONE. The five (5) civilians were Madam Nabila, Mr. Zubair, Miss Jannah, Madam Andi, and Mr. Shaiful while the five (5) members of the security force were Rear Admiral Dato' Sabri Zali from Naval Area Two, Sergeant Mohd Zain Pulalun from Special Branch of Sandakan Headquarters Police Station, Commander Maritime Mr. Mohd Khairul Anuar from Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency, Mr. Ab Rasil Hajatil from Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM), and Madam Jasmine Jawhar from Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT).

3.3 Data Processing and Analysis

The researchers utilised thematic analysis and computing applications made for qualitative research known as Atlas.ti during the data analysing process. All of the responses from the participants were documented to ensure no important data were left out during the data analyses process. The researchers converted recordings of the interviews into interview transcripts to make it easy for analyses. Following that, the researchers read the interview transcripts and arranged the data according to the themes that were identified later.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

All ten participants were asked the set of questions that falls under three research objectives. The duration of each interview session was between 16 minutes and 51 minutes.

4.1 Awareness of citizens living in the east coast of Sabah about the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) in securing the safety of Sabah's eastern seaboard.

From the data gathered among all 10 participants, not all believe that the east coast of Sabah is totally safe. There were two participants who totally refused to believe that the east coast of Sabah is safe from threats. This is because there have been a few cases of recent kidnapping that happened before. To them the existence of external and internal factors that threaten the safety of ESSZONE is a reality that one cannot deny. However, since eight out of 10 participants were confident that the east coast of Sabah is safe and under control, we can safely deduce that the east coast of Sabah is not dangerous anymore. The kidnapping case mentioned earlier was not a common happening, wherein from 2013 till 16th December 2019, there were only two occurrences. Overall, the participants believe the situation in Sabah is much better than it was before 2013.

Based on the input extracted from the interviews, we can learn from all participants that ESSCOM is doing an excellent job to safeguard the people living in ESSZONE. In general, the people have their trust towards ESSCOM in maintaining and improving the security on the east coast of Sabah. More so with the establishment of a head agency that focuses on strategic operations in the area. They had a positive view on the existence of ESSCOM since it is an entity that will protect them with assistance from other agencies.

Most of the participants welcomed the implementation of curfews in the ESSZONE area as undertaking would accommodate the security forces to monitor all entry and exit points within Sabah. With the thousands of boats plying daily around the Sabah seas, there are always possibilities for terrorist or criminal groups to take advantage of the situation.. By imposing the curfews, the security forces can easily identify local or foreign vessels and determine which ones to be allowed to carry out fishing activities and which ones need to be detained for suspicious movements. In short, from the data gathered, residents in ESSZONE felt safe and secured with the presence of ESSCOM. The participants were also happy with the updated news and information they received daily which established ESSCOM as a trustworthy and reliable authority in the east coast of Sabah. As such, doubts and negative speculations by a small segment of people outside the ESSZONE community who did not live and work in the area or conduct research about the safety in the east coast of Sabah are unfounded.

Overall, from the data gathered the researchers find that the east coast of Sabah and the state of Sabah is safe for the ESSZONE residents after the establishment of ESSCOM . The imposition of curfews has been an effective mechanism for the security forces to control the number of entrances in Sabah's seaboard.

4.2 Security issues relating to the safety of Sabah's eastern seaboard.

From the data gathered through in-depth interview sessions with all 10 participants, it is obvious that the residents believed they were still prone to various threats and encounters with terrorist groups, particularly from southern Philippines. This means the security forces needed to be alert at all times as there is every possibility of a terrorist strike which could lead to various implications including the influence of radical ideologies among people, especially the youth who live on the east coast of Sabah.

Another critical aspect that needed attention and anticipation from external threat is the geography of Sabah. Its close distance, wide area and small surrounding islands could become strategic locations for assailants, smugglers or illegal settlers especially from southern Phillipines.

From the interviews, it was also uncovered that Sabah is faced with substantial illegal immigrants who have settled in the state since the past few generations. As expressed by a number of participants, this situation has threatened the livelihood of the locals because these illegal immigrants are controlling Sabah's maritime economy. They felt that the local fishermen were faced with the possibility of losing their jobs. Other than this issue, the participants were also concerned with the presence of ethnic Pala'us who live freely in the seas. To them, the Pala'us are also posing a threat since they can become arranged agents of smuggling syndicates or even potential supporters of terrorist groups.

The unmonitored water village and the existence of squatters among the local settlers in the area was also a concern for the participants as the place could become a potential crime spot. According to a number of them, the natural geography of Sabah itself which opens itself to illegal immigrants to seep and assimilate themselves with the local villagers has made it arduous for the security forces to detect their presence. Once they assimilate and intermarry with the local residents, they form family ties and consider themselves as a member of the Sabah community. This situation becomes more perplexing when many of the native Sabah settlers in the area lack the awareness spirit of patriotism towards their land.

Another challenging factor for the security forces, as stated by the participants, is the lack of up-to-date security assets and manpower to undertake their tasks effectively as these security personnel had to cover the security and safety of a huge area of 1733.7 kilometres tract of land. From the researchers' point of view, threats in the east coast of Sabah is

multi-layered as the menace were not only due to internal factors but also external elements. This explains why securing the safety in the east coast of Sabah needed a lot of effort on the part of the security forces.

In all, from the data gathered to fulfil Research Objective 2, the researchers deduce that there are varied and intertwined security issues related to the safety in Sabah's eastern seaboard. The most dominant issue is the complexity in restricting the entry of illegal settlers into Sabah which has to do with aspects such as the natural layout of Sabah coastline which exposes its borders to unwanted elements, the shortage of manpower and latest defence facilities for the security forces and lastly, the alluring, accommodative culture of the local residents towards outsiders of the community.

4.3 Improvement in securing the safety of Sabah's eastern seaboard

Most of the 10 participants that were interviewed highlighted the need for increasing the number of security assets and manpower. As mentioned in the earlier section, this emphasis was made due to the sheer geographic size of Sabah state. With increase in the number of security asset and manpower, it would certainly address the problem of poor resources and ensure the smooth and effective operation of the security forces.

Since it was difficult to distinguish between the natives and the illegal immigrants living at the water village, it had the potential to be a criminal hotspot and therefore it needed to be reorganised or even eliminated. In this way, the genuine natives could be identified against the illegal immigrants. Once detected, the government would have to take swift action to deport them back to their home country. This is to avoid Sabah from becoming a criminal hub for terrorist or other illegal activities. As such, the participants suggested that the related government authority appoint informers among the locals to monitor suspicious activities because they understand the geography of their surroundings. This move would instil the spirit of patriotism and love for the country which was found to be lacking among the natives. At the same time, by appointing them as government informers, the government is not only exposing the community on the importance of national security but also building trust and a solid bond with them.

There is no doubt that security operation in the area needed strengthening and improvements in order to avoid the repeat of the Lahad Datu incursion and other forms of illegal activities. Among other things, to avoid any criminal activities such as kidnapping, cross-border crime

and smuggling, all entry and exit points need surveillance and monitoring round-the-clock. Besides this, law enforcement procedures also need to be enhanced. For instance, as a form of deterrent, traitors to the country would have to face severe penalty for their crime towards the country's sovereignty. As for international relations with neighbouring countries, Malaysia should work closely with its close neighbours of Philippines and Indonesia for the purpose of joint operations and intelligence.

The suggestions above show that there are a lot of room for improvement with regards to securing the safety in the east coast of Sabah. Nevertheless, the most critical of all is the need for local communities to be official informers for the security personnel. Without their active involvement and cooperation as front-liners, it would be very demanding to advance the security in ESSZONE because at the very least they would be the best eye-witnesses for any untoward incidents in the area.

Overall, from all the data gathered for Research Objective 3, the participants unanimously emphasized the need for improvement in securing safety in the east coast of Sabah. In the researchers' point of view, their voices need to be listened and taken serious consideration since they are the ones who experience the daily goings-on in the area.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This study has exposed new information and knowledge on the safety and security issues in the east coast of Sabah and the strategies by ESSCOM, the agency directly involved in improving national security. This research has also given the opportunity for the researchers to meet with a number of important individuals in the national security workforce to exchange information on national safety and security of Sabah in particular.

As stated in the findings, ESSCOM has proven itself as a relevant organization in securing the safety of the east coast of Sabah. This entity has indeed executed their responsibility significantly and successfully to ascertain that there shall never be a second wave of incursion. With ESSCOM centred on the east coast of Sabah, it is a clear assurance that the people of Sabah would be free from threats and intimidations from outside forces.

The multiple comments and varied opinions from participants have uncovered many issues, small and big. Some of the concerns may seem trivial to the man on the street but when probed deeper, these so called "minor internal problems" can trigger a major issue to the country's security if not addressed appropriately. A case in point is the assimilation of the illegal immigrants amongst

the local community which was taken lightly by the authorities before the Lahad Datu incursion. It is hoped that results of this study has made us aware of the significance of being vigilant at all times with regards to the security for our nation's sovereignty. As such, being patriotic is an obligation for all Malaysian citizens who love their country. In fact, a lack of or no sense of patriotism can produce informers to foreign elements who would eventually end up as traitors to the country. In short, the public at large must be responsible citizens by reporting to the authorities on suspicious characters from among them.

For the safety and security of the east coast of Sabah to be maintained at all times, ESSCOM must be equipped with the most up-to-date security assets and manpower so that criminal activities along the seaboard can be completely wiped out. As indicated earlier, the responsibility of taking care of security matters does not completely fall under security forces alone, the civilians should also play their part to safeguard the nation from foreign intruders. The authorities also need to look at the root of the problem and be continuously vigilant in the field to effectively execute what actually needs to be done to improve our national security. Just like what the late second Malaysian Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak said: "*The success of the country actually depends on its people*".

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