

FOREIGN TOURISTS' PERCEPTION OF THEIR SAFETY AT EASTERN SABAH: THE ROLE OF ESSCOM

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ABSTRACT

This research was carried out with the aim to gauge the perception of foreign tourists on their personal safety and security at Eastern Sabah. The research involved 476 foreign tourist respondents who visited Eastern Sabah; out of which 350 were from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, 74 were from Europe (Germany, Switzerland and United Kingdom) and 36 were from other countries. The research instrument used was a questionnaire. Descriptive analysis shows that majority of the respondents felt that they were reasonably safe or very safe after arriving in Eastern Sabah. When asked if they would come back again to Eastern Sabah if given the opportunity, almost all of them answered they would. Majority would also encourage their family members and friends to visit Eastern Sabah. Respondents from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong were more aware of the existence of ESSCOM than respondents from Europe and other countries. Almost all of them felt safer with ESSCOM around and they also believed that ESSCOM is doing their job adequately. The fact that the respondents do feel safer with the presence of ESSCOM and that they will visit Eastern Sabah again show that they are confident that ESSCOM is able to look after their personal safety and security. These findings suggest that perhaps more publicity about the role of ESSCOM should be given to foreign tourists to help the Malaysian tourist industry.

Keywords: ESSCOM, ESSZONE, Eastern Sabah, perception, foreign tourists, Malaysia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sabah is one of the 14 states in Malaysia. It is located at the northern part of the island of Borneo. It is well-known for its 4,095 metres above sea level Mount Kinabalu, which is also Malaysia's highest peak. Sabah is also well-known as a tourist destination for its beautiful beaches, rainforest, coral reefs and abundant wildlife. Sabah's islands, such as Sipadan, Matakang and Mabul, are popular diving destinations. However, the intrusion of a group of terrorists from Southern Philippines into Kampung Tanduo, Lahad Datu, Eastern Sabah on 9 February 2013 had rattled the nation and marked a dark episode in Sabah's history. Although countless attempts by the so-called royal Sulu descendants had been made to claim the Sabah's land, the intrusion on 9 February 2013, which caused state-wide panic, was the worst (Astro Awani, 9 March 2013). Nonetheless, with the quick mobilisation of security personnel through "*Ops Daulat*" (Operation Sovereignty), 600 people were detained under The Security Offences (Special Measures) Act 2012, a procedural law that provides for special measures relating to security offences for the purpose of maintaining public order, security and related matters. The Act would be read together with the Penal Code. Out of the 600 detainees, only 31 of them were charged and tried under Section 130C of the Penal Code for committing terrorist acts. They were also charged for offences against the state under Section 121 of the same Act for waging war against the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* (King of Malaysia). However, during the standoff, a total of 56 followers of the royal Sulu descendants, Philippines and 16 personnel from the security forces of Malaysia were reported to be killed (ESSCOM, 2017). The effective collaborations of various security agencies, namely Royal Malaysia Police (RMP) and Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF), had contributed to the success of *Ops Daulat*.

In order to restore and ensure peace and security after the Lahad Datu incident, especially in the districts of Semporna, Lahad Datu and Sandakan, the Malaysian government had established the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM), which was launched by Prime Minister Najib Razak on 13 April 2013 (Channel NewsAsia, 13 April 2013). The main purpose of establishing ESSCOM was to strengthen maritime security in the eastern part of Sabah following the persistent attacks by pirates and militants in the southern Philippines and also to ensure that the economic activities were not affected. The headquarters of ESSCOM is presently located at the middle of Lahad Datu town. It is the authoritative body that oversees the Eastern Sabah Security Zone (ESSZONE) which covers 1,733 km of the east coast of Sabah from Kudat to Tawau. ESSZONE comprises the districts of Kudat, Kota Marudu, Pitas, Beluran, Sandakan, Kinabatangan, Lahad Datu, Kunak, Semporna and Tawau [refer to Lai (2015), and Eboy and Zaini (2017) for further information]. Figure 1 shows the map of ESSZONE.



Figure 1: Map of the ESSZONE Areas

Source: ESSCOM, 2017

ESSCOM plays the role of coordinating the tasks of the Royal Malaysia Police, Malaysian Armed Forces, Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency and the assigned civilian agencies under the Preservation of Public Security Regulations 2013. Figure 2 shows the components of ESSCOM.

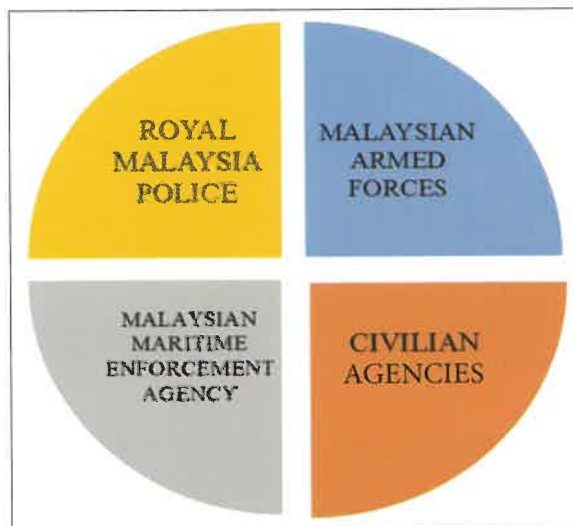


Figure 2: Components in ESSCOM

Source: ESSCOM, 2017

After four years of its establishment, ESSCOM has implemented various security strategies to maintain law and order within the ESSZONE. However, it has constantly been confronted with challenges such as influx of illegal immigrants, trans-border crimes, smuggling and kidnapping with weapons. These challenges have created positive as well as negative perception of ESSCOM among the locals. Those with negative perception have suggested for ESSCOM to be disbanded as they perceived that ESSCOM is not able to prevent these criminal activities (Sinar Harian, 9 April 2016). On the other hand, those who believe that ESSCOM is able to safeguard the security of ESSZONE, has supported for its continued existence.

As a result of the negative perception of ESSCOM by certain section of the community and that no research was ever carried out on the effectiveness of ESSCOM in safeguarding the coastal area of Eastern Sabah after four years of its establishment, the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi⁵, agreed with the suggestion of the then Inspector General of Police, Khalid Abu Bakar, that the Institute of Public Security and Safety of Malaysia (IPSOM), would be given the responsibility to conduct the research. IPSOM then engaged the Centre of Defence and International Security Studies (CDISS) at the National Defence University of Malaysia (UPNM) to collaborate on this study. It should be pointed out that IPSOM and CDISS had agreed to collaborate for the interest of national security without being given any research grant.

This research is part of a bigger project on the perception of the effectiveness of ESSCOM in looking after the security of ESSZONE. The entire project consists of three parts:

- i. To survey the local inhabitants of Eastern Sabah on their perception of their personal safety and security;
- ii. To survey the foreign tourists' perception on their personal safety and security; and
- iii. To investigate the problems and obstacles faced by ESSCOM personnel in looking after the security of Eastern Sabah.

This paper will discuss the findings of the second part of the project which is to survey the foreign tourists' perception on their personal safety and security.

⁵ The Deputy Prime Minister is also currently the Minister of Home Affairs of Malaysia. His appointment as Deputy Prime Minister took effect on 28 July 2015.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

As mentioned earlier, this survey was carried out to gauge the perception of foreign tourists on their personal safety and security at Eastern Sabah. The quantitative approach of the survey involved the administration of questionnaires to the respondents by trained enumerators. Enumerators were employed to avoid having to reject questionnaires for the analysis due to missing data.

The questionnaire, which was created by the researchers with the assistance of personnel from the Royal Malaysia Police, ESSCOM and Ministry of Home Affairs, was originally in English. It was then translated into Mandarin by members of the research team who are well-versed in the language. The questionnaire was first piloted in mid March 2017 to gauge the clarity of the questions to the respondents. Minor changes were carried out on the questionnaire. The final questionnaire consists of two parts as follows:

- i. Section A, which consists of 6 questions, is on the socio-demographic information of the respondents - their age, gender, citizenship, marital status, whether they have children and their education level;
- ii. Section B, which consists of 9 main questions, investigate the respondents' perception of their own security when they were visiting Eastern Sabah. Questions asked include "Since you arrived in Eastern Sabah, do you feel that Eastern Sabah is a safe place?", "Will you come back to Eastern Sabah again if given the opportunity", "Will you encourage your family members and friends to visit Eastern Sabah?" and "Are you aware that the Malaysian government has set up the ESSCOM to look after our tourists?".

Fieldwork was carried out in early April 2017 in three districts (Semporna, Lahad Datu and Sandakan) simultaneously and led by the three researchers after obtaining the approval of the Commander of ESSCOM and the Sabah Commissioner of Police. To ensure that fieldwork was carried out smoothly, the Officer In-Charge of Police District (OCPD) of the three districts and their personnel were requested to assist the researchers. The assistance that they gave include providing transportation, "local" enumerators and booking of accommodation. The "local" enumerators were trained by the researchers before they were deployed to carry out the fieldwork. Briefing sessions were carried out every night during fieldwork to report back and discuss the progress of the research.

A total of 480 foreign tourists who visited East Sabah at the time were surveyed. However, only 476 questionnaires filled up were used for data analysis. Although enumerators were used to interview the respondents, some of the respondents insisted on filling in the questionnaires themselves. As such, there were missing data in some questionnaires. Any questionnaire with more than a third of unanswered questions was not included in the data analysis. Eventually four questionnaires had to be left out. The total number of respondents' questionnaires used for data analysis was 476 comprised of 358 respondents (75.2%) in Semporna (the main tourist area), 15 respondents (3.2%) in Lahad Datu and 103 respondents (21.6%) in Sandakan. The respondents were chosen randomly in the main tourist areas in the three districts. The data collected was analysed using the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS) version 17.

3. FINDINGS

The socio-demographic information of the respondents is shown in Table 1. Majority of the respondents were between 18 to 50 years old (82.7%), female (54.7%), from China, Taiwan or Hong Kong (76.1%), married (54.7%), with no children (57.2%) and with tertiary education (75.2%).

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Information of the Foreign Tourist Respondents at Eastern Sabah

Age	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
18-30 years	191	40.2
31-50 years	202	42.5
51-70 years	76	16.0
71 years and above	6	1.3
Total	475	100.0
Gender	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Male	215	45.3
Female	260	54.7
Total	475	100.0
Country	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
China/Taiwan/Hong Kong	350	76.1
Europe	74	16.1
Others	36	7.8
Total	460	100.0

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Marital Status	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Single	190	40.0
Married	260	54.7
Divorce	17	3.6
Widow/widower	8	1.7
Total	475	100.0

Whether respondents have children	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	203	42.8
No	271	57.2
Total	474	100.0

Education level	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
No education	8	1.7
Primary school	15	3.2
Secondary school/ High school	95	20.0
University	358	75.2
Total	476	100.0

Table 2 provides some information on the respondents' visit to Eastern Sabah. Majority of the respondents (87.3%) were visiting Eastern Sabah for the first time. At the time of the interviews, majority (58.5%) had already been in Eastern Sabah for two to five days, followed by 29% who had already been there for between six to ten days. Majority (55.2%) of the respondents had planned to stay at Eastern Sabah for six to ten days, followed by 27.7% who had planned to stay for three to five days. Most of them (77.3%) did find out more about Eastern Sabah before they planned their journey. Their main source of information was the internet (66.2%), followed by information obtained from their friends and colleagues (23.1%), travel brochures (15.1%), travel agents (10.1%), television programmes (8.8%), tourist offices (7.1%) and family members (6.7%).

Table 2: Information on The Foreign Tourist Respondents' Visit to Eastern Sabah

Whether this was the first time the respondents have been to Eastern Sabah	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
First time	414	87.3
Not first time	60	12.7
Total	474	100.0
No. of days respondents have arrived in Eastern Sabah	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1 day	43	9.1
2-5 days	276	58.5
6-10 days	137	29.0
11-15 days	16	3.4
Total	472	100.0
The no. of days respondents will be staying in Eastern Sabah	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1-2 day	46	9.9
3-5 days	129	27.7
6-10 days	257	55.2
11-15 days	29	6.2
16-20 days	5	1.1
Total	466	100.0
Whether respondents found out more about Eastern Sabah before their trips	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	367	77.3
No	108	22.7
Total	475	100.0
Source of information on Eastern Sabah for the respondents	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Internet	315	66.2
Travel Brochures	72	15.1
Television	42	8.8
Tourist Office	34	7.1
Travel Agent	48	10.1
Family members	32	6.7
Friends / colleagues	110	23.1

Table 3: Perception of Foreign Tourist Respondents on Their Personal Safety and Security While at Eastern Sabah

Perception of personal safety and security while at Eastern Sabah	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Very safe	151	31.9
Reasonably safe	186	39.2
Not sure	132	27.8
Reasonably unsafe	5	1.1
Very unsafe	0	0
Total	474	100.0
Whether respondents will come back to Eastern Sabah if given the opportunity	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	450	94.7
No	25	5.3
Total	475	100.0
Whether respondents will encourage their family members and friends to visit Eastern Sabah	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	435	91.6
No	40	8.4
Total	475	100.0
Whether respondents are aware that the Malaysian government has established ESSCOM to look after tourists	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	295	62.4
No	178	37.6
Total	473	100.0
Whether respondents feel safer with ESSCOM around	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	290	96.3
No	11	3.7
Total	301	100.0
Whether respondents believe that ESSCOM is doing its job adequately	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	289	96.3
No	11	3.7
Total	300	100.0

Table 3 shows the perception of the respondents on their personal safety and security while they were at Eastern Sabah. Majority of the respondents felt that they were reasonably safe (39.2%) or very safe (31.9%). When asked if they would come back again to Eastern Sabah if given the opportunity, almost all of the respondents (94.7%) answered that they would. Majority of the foreign tourist respondents (91.6%) would encourage their family members and friends to visit Eastern Sabah. A total of 62.4% of the foreign tourist respondents were aware that the Malaysian government has established ESSCOM to look after its tourists. Out of these, 96.3% said that they felt safer with ESSCOM around and 96.3% also believed that ESSCOM was doing their job adequately.

Chi-square test could not be carried out to test if there is any significant difference between the foreign tourist respondents from different parts of the world and whether they felt safe after arriving in Eastern Sabah as the minimum expected count is less than one. However cross tabulation (Table 4) shows that 52.8% of the respondents from other parts of the world such as Malta, Mexico and United States of America (US); 48.6% of the respondents from Europe such as Germany, Switzerland and United Kingdom; and 25.3% from China, Taiwan or Hong Kong felt very safe after arriving in Eastern Sabah. Overall, 31.2% of the respondents felt very safe while 39.1% felt reasonably safe after arriving at Eastern Sabah. Only 1.1% felt unsafe and 28.6% were not sure.

Table 4: Foreign Tourist Respondents' Perception of their Personal Safety and Security After Arriving at Eastern Sabah

Country	Very safe	Reasonably safe	Not sure	Reasonably unsafe	Total
China/Taiwan Hong Kong	88 (25.3%)	136 (39.1%)	119 (34.2%)	5 (1.4%)	348 (100%)
Europe	36 (48.6%)	29 (39.2%)	9 (12.2%)	0 (0%)	74 (100%)
Others	19 (52.8%)	14 (38.9%)	3 (8.3%)	0 (0%)	36 (100%)
Total	143 (31.2%)	179 (39.1%)	131 (28.6%)	5 (1.1%)	458 (100%)

Foreign tourists from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong were more aware of the existence of ESSCOM than foreign tourists from Europe and other countries (Chi-square = 58.887. df = 2, p = .000). Cross tabulation (Table 5) shows that only 72.9% of the foreign tourists from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong; 29.7% of the European tourists; and 38.9% of the tourists from other countries were aware of the existence of ESSCOM.

Table 5: Awareness of the Foreign Tourist Respondents on the Existence of ESSCOM

Country	Yes	No	Total
China/Taiwan/Hong Kong	253 (72.9%)	94 (27.1%)	347 (100.0%)
Europe	22 (29.7%)	52 (70.3%)	74 (100.0%)
Lain-lain	14 (38.9%)	22 (61.1%)	36 (100.0%)
Total	289 (63.2%)	168 (36.8%)	457 (100.0%)

4. DISCUSSION

From the survey carried out, it is observed that foreign tourists who visited Eastern Sabah were mainly from China, Taiwan or Hong Kong and with tertiary education. The researchers were informed by local travel agents that there were two reasons why more tourists came from these places:

- i. There was no travel alert being issued by the China, Taiwan and Hong Kong travel authorities on Eastern Sabah unlike the other countries, especially from Europe and US; and
- ii. As no travel alert was issued in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, the tourists were able to purchase travel insurance for Eastern Sabah unlike the other countries.

Although foreign tourist from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong (72.9%) were more aware of the existence of ESSCOM than foreign tourists from Europe (29.7%) and other countries (38.9%), only about a quarter of them (25.3%) felt very safe after arriving in Eastern Sabah compared to about half of the respondents from other parts of the world (52.8%) and Europe (48.6%). Overall, about 70% of the respondents felt very safe or reasonably safe after arriving at Eastern Sabah.

Of all the respondents who were aware of the existence of ESSCOM (62.4%), almost all of them felt safer with ESSCOM around (96.3%) and also believed that ESSCOM was doing their job adequately (96.3%). Majority of the respondents (94.7%) would come back again to Eastern Sabah if given the opportunity and they (91.6%) would also encourage their family members and friends to visit Eastern Sabah. These findings suggest that perhaps more publicity about the role of ESSCOM should be given to foreign tourists to help the Malaysian tourist

industry. The fact that the respondents do feel safer with the presence of ESSCOM and that they would visit Eastern Sabah again show that they are confident that ESSCOM will be able to look after their personal safety and security.

As most of the respondents (77.3%) do look up information on Eastern Sabah before they plan their journey, the relevant authorities in Malaysia, such as the Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board and Ministry of Tourism and Culture, could also promote the role of ESSCOM in their information material for foreign tourists. As noted in the survey, the best means for disseminating information to foreign tourists are firstly via the internet, followed by travel brochures, travel agents, television programmes and tourist offices.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be observed that the travel industry in Eastern Sabah may have been affected by the travel alert issued by European countries and other countries such as United States of America. In order to overcome this obstacle, perhaps highlighting and publicizing on the role of ESSCOM would be of help. It is also observed that the establishment of ESSCOM does play a role in making Eastern Sabah safer and that foreign tourists do feel safe when they visit Eastern Sabah. Perhaps the main challenge at present is for the relevant authorities in Malaysia to increase the awareness of ESSCOM among foreign tourists and their governments to encourage them to visit Eastern Sabah. This will help the tourism industry in Eastern Sabah.

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