

The Kalabakan Incident, 1963: Indonesian Military Incursion into Malaysian Territory during Confrontation

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ABSTRACT

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The Battle of Kalabakan, which occurred on 29 December 1963, stands as a critical episode in Malaysia's military history, marking the Indonesian Army's cross-border incursion into the Sabah–East Kalimantan frontier during the height of the Indonesia–Malaysia Confrontation. Referred to as the “Kalabakan Incident” by the Malaysian Armed Forces (ATM) and remembered as the “Fiery Night of Kalabakan” by the Sabah border community, the battle resulted in heavy casualties on both sides and exposed the vulnerability of Malaysia's eastern frontier in the early years of independence. Despite its significance, previous scholarship has provided only limited analysis of this event, particularly in relation to its strategic dimensions and human impact. This article addresses these historiographical gaps by examining the efforts of the 3rd Battalion of the Royal Malay Regiment (3 RAMD) in defending national sovereignty, alongside the patriotic contributions of the Sabah border community. Employing a qualitative descriptive methodology, this study draws upon archival research, oral history interviews with Confrontation veterans, and field investigations conducted at the Kalabakan battle site. By integrating previously untapped archival documents and first-hand testimonies, this article not only reconstructs the sequence of events at Kalabakan but also highlights the broader themes of patriotism, resilience, and local mobilisation during the Confrontation. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of Malaysia's military and social history, reaffirming the importance of collective memory in preserving the legacy of national defence.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes significantly to the literature on the 1963 Indonesia–Malaysia Confrontation by highlighting the Kalabakan Incident as the first military incursion of the conflict and examining Indonesia's cross-border attacks on Malaysian territory. It also reinforces Malaysian military historiography and underscores early post-Malaysia security threats along the Sabah–North Kalimantan border.

1. Introduction

Malaysia achieved sovereignty on September 16, 1963, but its independence was met with strong opposition from neighboring Indonesia ([Daily Express, 1963](#)), which introduced a new term known as 'Konfrontasi' or Ganyang Malaysia. This opposition took place during the Cold War era and was emphasized by President Sukarno and strongly supported by the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) as a response to what was seen as 'neo-colonialism' challenging the concept of the 'Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia' (NKRI). Indonesia's confrontation with Malaysia took two main forms of opposition: political and military. However, the aggressive actions of the military invasion had shocked the people in the Malaysian border during the Konfrontasi episode ([Mad Ali @ Abang, 2021](#)).

Rejim Sukarno's actions tore into Sabah, particularly the border area. Kalabakan Tawau was surprised by the Indonesian military in the Battle of Kalabakan on December 29, 1963 ([Mad Ali @ Abang, 2008](#)). This invasion and attack are part of the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation, 1963-1966, which marked the early history of Sabah's independence within Malaysia. However, this independence was not easily accepted by some, especially the Sukarno regime. The misunderstanding of Malaysia eventually led to a new era for the two Malay allies ([Mad Ali @ Abang, 2024](#)).

Sukarno's response was not only political propaganda but also invasions and surprise attacks by Indonesian troops on the Sabah-East Kalimantan border. These subversive military actions showed Sukarno's seriousness in confronting Malaysia. Malaysia, as a newly independent and sovereign country, tried to defend its sovereignty ([Mad Ali @ Abang, 2012](#)).

2. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive methodology aimed at addressing historiographical gaps in existing literature, particularly the lack of in-depth analysis concerning the Battle of Kalabakan. A triangulated approach was employed, combining library research, archival investigation, oral history interviews, and on-site fieldwork to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the event. Library research was conducted across several institutions, including the University of Malaysia Sabah (UMS), the Sabah State Library, and the National University of Malaysia (UKM), to review published works and scholarly references related to the Confrontation. Archival materials were examined at the Sabah State Archives, the National Archives of Malaysia, and the Malaysian Army Museum (Muzium Tentera Darat) to obtain official records, operational reports, and military correspondence from the period. To complement documentary sources, oral history interviews were carried out with surviving veterans of the Confrontation, including retired military personnel and members of the Sabah border community directly affected by the incident. Additionally, fieldwork at the Kalabakan battle site in Tawau, Sabah, was conducted to contextualise the spatial and environmental aspects of the conflict and to cross-reference archival accounts with geographical realities. This multi-sourced methodological framework enhances both the empirical depth and narrative authenticity of the research, enabling a more holistic reconstruction of the Battle of Kalabakan and its broader significance in Malaysia's military and social history.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Chronology of the Kalabakan Invasion and Attack on 29th December 1963

The reality is that Kalabakan has witnessed Sabah's independence in Malaysia. The efforts to defend Kalabakan also involved the Malaysian defense and security forces. However, the involvement of Sabah's people, especially those living on the border, also took part in defending Kalabakan. Therefore, this writing will carefully trace the events and unravel their significance in the history of Sabah, Malaysia, and the military history of Malaysia (Syed Omar, 1999).

The Kalabakan Invasion and Attack took place on December 29, 1963, not far from Bandar Tawau, Sabah (Mad Ali @ Abang et al., 2009). The Indonesian military had sent the Kor-Komando Operasi (KKO) to capture Kalabakan before moving to Tawau and Sandakan. A total of 128 men were involved, some of whom were untrained Scouts. Thirty-five Indonesian soldiers were divided into four detachments. A group of thirty-six men including eight KKO were placed under the command of Sarjan Benny of the KKO. Wayang also headed thirty-six members including fifteen KKO, Lasani headed thirty-four members, while Sarjan Buronto from KKO headed twenty-two members. They moved from Kem in Kalimantan to Serudung (Mad Ali @ Abang, 2008).

On December 21, 1963, they had robbed a shop in Serudung before moving to Silimpopon. On the night of December 28, 1963, they rested in a base balak area near Kalabakan. There were two Malaysian security forces stationed in Kalabakan. A Balai Polis with a strength of 15 members was located approximately 600 ela from the post in question, and there was also a military placement inhabited by Platun 1 Kompeni A together with two sexyen Platun 10 Kompeni C, Rejimen Askar Melayu DiRaja ketiga (RAMD 3) (James & Small, 1991; Will, 2006).

The Indonesian soldiers had attacked Infantry and Company C Askar Melayu Diraja troops guarding a logging area on the border. On the evening of December 29, 1963, Sarjan Benny had led his group into an attack from two positions. One group attacked from the top of the hill to the RAMD-3 platoon placement. An officer and seven members of RAMD-3 were sacrificed while eighteen others were injured (Daily Express, 1963).

The second group moved to attack the Police Post ten minutes after the attack on the RAMD-3 deployment. The lack of coordination in the attack gave the head of the Police deployment the opportunity to get help from nineteen members of the Police and Home Guard who were already available in the post area before the battle began (Mad Ali @ Abang et al., 2009). In the battle that ensued, the police managed to kill one and injure four Indonesian gunmen. The battle lasted for four hours before the Indonesian Army retreated north of Kalabakan. One Scout Troop and elements of the 2nd A Squadron repel troop chaired by Lefternan M.B.T Chong were the first Malaysian military forces deployed to assist the 3rd RAMD (Syed Omar, 2005).

A second attack was also launched against Balai Polis after ten minutes. The attackers were later captured as prisoners, and the Konfrontasi was ended. Before the arrival of the 3rd RAMD, Kalabakan already had its troops. In Kalabakan, there was a Balai Polis Hutan team not far from the North Borneo Timber (NBT) office, which was adjacent to the military post (Syed Omar, 2005; 1999).

Additionally, Malaysia has also cancelled the deployment of an additional 800 troops to Congo as part of the United Nations Peacekeeping Force and is considering recalling its troops currently serving in Congo. However, the situation became chaotic when an Indonesian Navy vessel attacked a Malaysian boat in the waters of Malaya, claiming it was involved in smuggling activities. To counter such infiltration threats, the Malayan Navy increased its patrols in the waters. In an effort to strengthen the Navy, the Malayan government purchased several helicopters and speed boats from Britain and France to match the Indonesian naval power (Syed Omar, 2005; 1999).

According to Fowler (2006), in response to the escalating confrontation, on September 18, 1963, Malaysia declared a state of preparedness to face opposition from Indonesia and the Philippines. Realizing the aggressive threat of the Indonesian army to Malaysian territory in Sabah and Sarawak, Britain then began to send 20,000 soldiers from the Strategic Reserve Unit to strengthen Malaysia's defenses. Malaysia then formed the Malaysian Defense Council to take steps to ensure the safety of the country (Fowler, 2006). Immediate steps were taken to strengthen the security forces to face any eventuality (Mad Ali @ Abang, 2021). Britain had then informed Tunku Abdul Rahman that Britain was ready to help Malaysia to defend its sovereignty. Australia also announced its intention to send troops to Malaysian territories in Borneo in the event of an Indonesian military invasion (Mad Ali @ Abang, 2023). At that time, Malaysia's defense position was still in its early stages of development. The Kingdom of Malaysia allocated only eight percent of its state budget to defense, with its land army consisting of eight battalions, including two from Singapore, several shield trains, and a small cannon squad. However, the presence of the Commonwealth army, equipped with sophisticated military equipment under the AMDA Agreement, further strengthened Malaysia's defenses (Mad Ali @ Abang, 2021). In contrast, the strength of the Indonesian military at that time was evident during the Trikora and Dwikora operations, where Indonesia appeared to have a very large and modern force (Syed Omar, 2005; 1999).

3.2. After the Battle

According to reports, several weapons were known to have been lost by the 3rd RAMD during the Kalabakan incident. Immediately after the attack on Kalabakan on December 29, orders from the army announced that Kalabakan was still in a state of 'emergency' (Syed Omar, 2005; 1999). All daily activities of the villagers were hampered. However, villagers could still go out to do their normal work but were required to take a Safety Pass at the Forest Police Center for their safety. The Malaysian military guarded their every movement to prevent them from being kidnapped by TNKU, which was still around Kalabakan. All villagers were directed to clean up the forest area up to about twelve chains from the banks of the Kalabakan River to the military post in mutual cooperation (Syed Omar, 2005; 1999).

The villagers were directed to make mines to ensure the safety of the village from being invaded by the Indonesian military. Almost all the villagers were involved because they were unable to work due to the caging order. In addition to the villagers, employees of Syarikat North Borneo Timber (NBT) also participated in clearing the hilltop area adjacent to the military post to build the airstrip. Syarikat NBT had directed all its workers for this purpose. The hill area was leveled using Syarikat NBT's equipment under the direction of Mr. Ress. The villagers, together with the Malaysian military, had worked together to clear the hill area for the helicopter landing site (Syed Omar, 2005; 1999).

During the caging order, the villagers also experienced difficulties in getting out to get food supplies. All food supplies during the period were supplied by the Malaysian military. Thanks to the excellent cooperation given by the villagers, one by one the invading army was crushed by the Malaysian army which was assisted by relief troops from Gurkha and Australia. The villagers owe a lot to the Malaysian military for ensuring the security of the villagers and, most importantly, the independence of the country (Syed Omar, 2005; 1999).

On January 2, 1964, a 1/10th Gurkha military force led by Lieutenant Colonel Burnett was sent to Kalabakan to assist the 3rd RAMD in conducting searches in the Kalabakan area. On January 27, a ronda group from Company B under Leftenan Muda Ishar Bin Sham (12221) encountered a camp of invading soldiers and a battle ensued. A member of the Indonesian Army was killed, two guns, 12 hand bombs, and a number of bullets were found. The 6th platoon under the leadership of Leftenan Muda Abdul Aziz Shaari (12178), during a sneak attack on Merotai Estet on January 28, managed to kill three members of the Indonesian Army after experiencing a fierce battle with the enemy. By February 10, 29 members of the Indonesian Army had been killed, 33 members taken prisoner, while 22 more members had surrendered (Mad Ali @ Abang, 2012). The Malaysian army took appropriate action and immediately received assistance from the Gurkha and Australian armies, which helped trace and track TNKU. The Home Guard also assisted in the operation to track TNKU into the forest around Kalabakan (Syed Omar, 2005; 1999).

3.3. The Significance of the Kalabakan Invasion and Attack to Malaysia's History

The significance of the historical events of the Kalabakan battle to the history of Malaysia is very important. Kalabakan, located in Tawau, Sabah, provides clear evidence that Malaysia defends its sovereignty as an independent country. Although there were many incursions and attacks by Indonesian troops that crossed into Malaysian territory on the border, Malaysia was still able to survive. Kalabakan became a significant place in the history of Malaysia, the history of Sabah, and the history of the Malaysian military, especially the 3rd RAMD. The Bukit Kepong incident became the foundation stone of the symbolic struggle against the threat of Communist terrorists in the Malay Land, often presented to the public ahead of the Independence Day speech (Syed Omar, 2005; 1999).

Infect, Pertempuran Kalabakan or Acara Kalabakan was also revealed and emphasized in the lead-up to Malaysia's formation as a nation, as an effort by the defense and security forces to protect the country's sovereignty so that the people understand and appreciate that the nation was also defended with bloodshed. The Battle of Kalabakan clearly demonstrates the strong patriotic spirit of the Malaysian army, which was able to withstand the invasion of the Indonesian army despite being outnumbered (Syed Omar, 2005; 1999).

Realizing this fact, patriotism becomes an essential aspect in the development process of a country, especially Malaysia (John, 1985; Knight, 1982). For example, Japan has developed progressively because it has made patriotism the core of its state and nation's development. Therefore, the economic base must be created by taking into account the factor of nationalism. Malaysia needs to instill nationalism in its people, and each person must understand the history of Malaysia with emphasis, namely, understanding, appreciating, and valuing the meaning of the struggle. Malaysia not only achieved

independence from British colonialism through negotiation but also involved bloodshed in the struggle. Kalabakan, Tawau, Sabah, serves as evidence of Malaysia's history in defending its status as a sovereign state from the invasion of the Indonesian army. See [Figure 1](#), 9 people killed in Indonesian terrorist attacks near Tawau.

Figure 1: Killed in attack Indonesian Terrorists in Action Near Tawau.



Sources: [Daily Express \(1963\)](#)

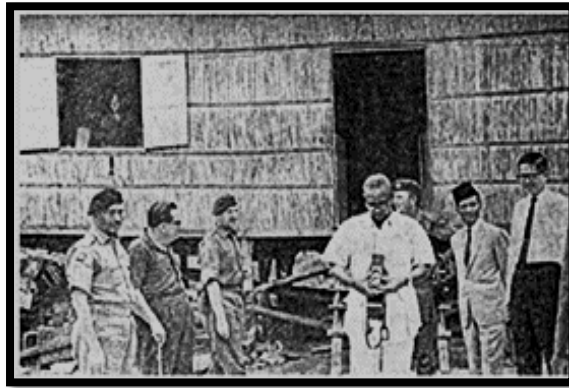
Recalling the history of the invasion and attack in Kalabakan, Tawau, Sabah, demands that every Malaysian citizen and their people have a sense of identity, obedience, and loyalty to be with Malaysia in any situation, which must be deeply ingrained in their hearts. The effort to remember this event can be seen in [Figure 2](#), and [Figure 3](#) when the first Prime Minister of Malaysia laid the foundation stone of the Kalabakan Memorial, on 30 December 1966.

Figure 2: The first Prime Minister laid the foundation stone of the Heroes Memorial Monument in Kalabakan



Sources: [Daily Express \(1966\)](#)

Figure 3: The first Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman.



Sources: [Daily Express \(1966\)](#)

Meanwhile, [Figure 4](#) shows the Foundation Stone of the Kalabakan Memorial to commemorate the services and sacrifices of the 3rd RAMD who defended Kalabakan from being captured by the Indonesian invading army. This historic event occurred two months after the formation of Malaysia. Kalabakan, Tawau, Sabah, witnessed a small number of local residents cooperating with the Indonesian army who invaded the Sabah-North Kalimantan border.

Figure 4: Foundation Stone of the Kalabakan Memorial Monument.



Sources: [Mad Ali @ Abang \(2008\)](#)

Meanwhile, [Figure 5](#) shows the Foundation Stone of the Kalabakan Memorial to commemorate the services and sacrifices of the 3rd RAMD who defended the military post from being captured by the Indonesian invading army.

Figure 5: Kalabakan Reenactment (2005)



Sources: [Royal Malay Regiment \(2005\)](#)

This memory and history were also re-enacted at the Kalabakan battle site on the initiative of the Supreme Colonel of the 3rd RAMD Sultan of Kedah Sultan Badlishah ibni Almarhum Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah in 2005. Kalabakan, Tawau, Sabah, witnessed a small number of locals who collaborated with Indonesian soldiers who broke into the Malaysian border.

5. Conclusions

The formation of Malaysia as a sovereign nation on 16 September 1963 marked a significant milestone in the post-colonial history of Southeast Asia. However, the Battle of Kalabakan on 29 December of the same year serves as stark evidence that the defence of this nascent nation was not achieved without bloodshed. The valiant stand of the 3rd Battalion of the Royal Malay Regiment (3 RAMD) in resisting the Indonesian military incursion reflects the profound commitment and sacrifice of the Malaysian armed forces in upholding national sovereignty during a period of heightened regional hostility.

The Indonesian military's unprovoked cross-border assault on the Malaysian defensive position at Kalabakan clearly signalled Jakarta's aggressive posture during Konfrontasi, and highlighted the vulnerability of Malaysia's newly established eastern frontier. In response, the unwavering resolve and patriotism demonstrated by 3 RAMD in defending the Kalabakan sector not only repelled the attack but also embodied the spirit of national resistance. Their struggle stands as a testament to the enduring ideal that Malaysia's independence was not only proclaimed but defended.

This episode underscores the broader narrative that national independence must be continually safeguarded through both physical defence and civic remembrance. As [Baharuddin \(2014\)](#) argues, patriotism is cultivated and sustained through collective memory and symbolic actions that reinforce national identity and cohesion. The case of Kalabakan, therefore, deserves greater recognition as a symbol of patriotic sacrifice, representing Malaysia's determination to defend its sovereignty and promote internal unity in a multiracial society.

In reaffirming Kalabakan's historical significance, we acknowledge that the security and harmony enjoyed by Malaysia today are underpinned by the sacrifices of those who fought to defend it. Thus, it is both appropriate and necessary to highlight Kalabakan not merely as a site of military engagement, but as a national emblem of patriotism, resilience, and unity in the face of external aggression.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

All informed consent from participants was obtained before this research was conducted. All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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