

Find the cause, orders Dr Mahathir

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IPOH, Mon. — Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today directed that all measures be taken to trace the toxins that caused the deaths of 11 children over the past nine days.

If necessary, the Prime Minister said, foreign experts will be invited to help the task force set up by the Health Ministry to investigate the deaths.

"We are anxious to get to the bottom of this and prevent it from happening again," he told reporters after visiting the victims at the General Hospital here.

Dr Mahathir, who was given an hour-long briefing by the task force, was here for a first-hand look.

He said the task force has still not been able to ascertain what caused the deaths "but they have made some progress in finding out how it happened."

"All we know is that it had something to do with food. The people are already being cautious and are staying away from certain food taken by the victims."

Asked if it was timely to declare an epidemic, Dr Mahathir said the situation did not warrant this.

On whether it was time for Malaysia to have its own poison centre, he said Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia was in the process of setting up one.

"In the meantime, we can make use of the poison centre in Singapore," he said, adding that he was satisfied with the care given to the victims.

He said the hospital was keeping tabs on all cases with symptoms like vomiting, stomach ache and diarrhoea.

"They will be checked thoroughly. We want to eliminate the possibility that they have the same illness," he said.

Dr Mahathir said doctors were giving symptomatic treatment to the victims.

"We hope the body's natural resistance will also be of some help to the doctors in fighting the sickness."

He said health officers were also checking all factories producing food to ensure their cleanliness but it was impossible to keep tabs on everyone.

"This is a matter of public education. Everyone should know food must be prepared hygienically.

"Only when people die do we realise the importance of this. We implemented the new Food Regulations from Oct 6, 1986, to tighten controls on food production."

Earlier, Health Minister Datuk Chan Siang Sun, who was on hand to meet Dr Mahathir, said the

Livers of victims were damaged by toxins

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results of some of the tests carried out on food samples will be known by Wednesday.

He said the results would further narrow down the possibilities and help the task force to solve the mystery.

Datuk Chan said the food samples were sent for analysis to Penang and Kuala Lumpur to make the results more reliable.

"We will be able to take preventive measures once we know what caused the deaths," he said.

He said the livers of all those who died and those in critical condition were badly affected by the toxins. It also affected their brains causing them to go into fits before lapsing into un-

consciousness.

"The task force has identified one or two types of virus which could have caused damage to the liver. We can stop the deteriorating condition of the victims if we know the cause."

Deputy Director-General of Health Datuk Dr Abdullah Abdul Rahman, who was also present, said the toxins which caused the deaths could be induced by a virus or a chemical.

He said the task force had sought the help of foreign specialists.

"Our specialists are in contact with Singaporean medical specialists as they had a similar experience in 1960 when 30 people died after being poisoned by the insecticide *Malathion*," he said.