

PM: WORKER COME FIRST

By Shah A. Dadameah

KUALA LUMPUR, W&d--
The Government will never neglect the workers because it needs their support to steer the nation to further economic growth, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir.. Mohamad said today.

Their needs and welfare have always been a matter of priority. If we neglect them we cannot hope to be one of the newly-industrialised countries (NICs)," the Prime Minister added.

Dr Mahathir said that while the Government had made efforts to reduce industrial unrest, it had also revised its investment conditions so that Malaysia could also achieve NIC status.

"With a good investment climate, we can have a strong workforce and a thriving economy. However, the Government's efforts to improve the lot of workers can be hampered if union leaders choose to politicise the campaign for workers' rights."

The Government was not against unions speaking up for the workers, Dr Mahathir said, but added that "we cannot be blamed for thinking that some unions are politically-motivated if their leaders are politicians."

Dr Mahathir was speaking at a Press conference after meeting a 17-member delegation from the MTUC at his office here.

It was the first time since Dr Mahathir took office in 1981 that he had met MTUC officials.

At the two-hour meeting, the MTUC handed to Dr Mahathir a 12-page memorandum containing its views on matters ranging from 14-hour laws to collective bargaining rights.

Also present was Labour Minister Datuk Lim Ah Lek with whom the group led by MTUC president

Zainal Hampak, had a meeting earlier (See Page 3).

Dr Mahathir said the meeting was cordial and gave him and the MTUC leaders a chance to speak their minds on various issues.

He said the delegation told him that although the MTUC was at times critical of the Government, it was not anti-government.

"I told them that our priority is economic growth, without which the workers will suffer. Some of the NICs now were previously backward nations whose workers were earning less than workers in Malaysia. Today their workers are earning better wages than ours."

He said it did not necessarily mean that workers who had the backing of strong unions would benefit more than other workers.

Dr Mahathir said in places like Taiwan and Hong Kong, many workers were not represented by unions yet they enjoyed good wages.

Dr Mahathir said he agreed with the MTUC that there was a backlog of cases in the industrial courts and this matter, among others included in the MTUC memorandum, would be given due attention.

However, he added, the Government could not consider the MTUC's proposal that the National Labour Advisory Council be given

QUOTE

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— Dr Mahathir yesterday.

powers to make decisions.

"It is, after all, an advisory body. The council members (representing the Government, employers and workers) do not fully understand the country's problems," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the Government also could not consider a single union for all electronics workers, as proposed by the MTUC, because each company had different capacities.

He said it would be unfair to have, for instance, a uniform scale for electronics workers because the smaller companies might not be able to comply.

With regard to the negotiating rights of government servants, Dr Mahathir said the Government had set up the public services tribunal to enable government staff to seek rectification to anomalies.

On the Government's privatisation programmes, Dr Mahathir said a member of the delegation had agreed that it was a good way to cut down on government expenses and to improve workers' earnings.

To suggestions that he was behind the move to form the Malaysian Labour Organisation, Dr Mahathir said: "It is the workers' decision. We do not stop them from forming any organisation they feel can best represent them."