

'Friends' of Penan exploiting issues, says Dr Mahathir

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PM: Expose these groups

By Ahmad A. Talib

MIRI, Fri. — Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today efforts should be made to expose individuals or groups who appeared to be environmentalists but were actually exploiting local issues for their own interests.

The Prime Minister said such individuals and groups included those who claimed to be friends and protectors of the Penan living in the interior of Sarawak.

Yesterday, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir met a group of Penan and told them to preserve their art and culture. But at the same time, he said, they should be open to efforts being undertaken by the Government to improve their lot.

Speaking at a Press conference at the end of his four-day official visit to Sarawak, Dr Mahathir said: "These people use communities like the Penan as a subject for a study. Then they travel around the world deriving income by giving talks and lectures on the subject.

"Therefore, these groups only promote their own vested interests and not that of the community, which continues to live in the jungle away from progress and development."

The Prime Minister said it was all right for these groups and individuals to talk about the Penan in the comfort of their homes, which were equipped with hot and cold showers.

Dr Mahathir said communities like the Penan had the right to a better life, just like anyone else.

"The Government realises this and is trying to bring development to them."

The Prime Minister re-

marked that no one had the right to tell the Penan that they could not have the right to change. "They must be given adequate opportunities to enjoy a better life."

These groups were actually using the Penan for financial gains, he said, adding that if their words were to be taken seriously even tourism could not be promoted.

"Only few people can appreciate the beauty of nature, for instance, of the Mulu Caves."

Why should only a few people get to see the beauty of the hinterland? the Prime Minister asked, adding that this was certainly undemocratic and selfish.

Therefore, the Government would continue efforts to promote tourism in Sarawak so that as many people as possible would appreciate nature's beauty and the environment.

Dr Mahathir expressed satisfaction at the rapid development taking place in the State. He said the numerous construction projects were a clear indication of actual development taking place.

He said Bintulu, which he visited yesterday, was destined to become one of the nation's growth centres.

"Bintulu is very different now compared to what I saw in the early '80s. It now has good roads and is well organised," the Prime Minister said.

He added that it used to be referred to as the *belacan* town but it had since grown 10 times over the years.

The Prime Minister said he was happy to see friendly faces in Sarawak.

"This reflects the healthy relations between the Federal and State Governments," he said.