

PM: FREEDOM OF INFORMATION HAS ITS LIMITS

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. — Governments should not suppress the truth but they fail in their duty if they allow the press to abuse their freedom by affecting the well-being of the people, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

The Prime Minister said today it was the duty of governments not only to protect democracy and freedom but also to ensure the social and economic well being of their citizens.

He said that while there should be press freedom, governments would not be doing their duty if they allowed this freedom to be abused such that lies were spread and the stability and economic well-being of the people undermined.

"It has even been accepted that lies can be fabricated in the name of freedom of the press.

"With the increasingly powerful weapons at the disposal of the press, it is entirely possible for the press not only to create totally erroneous views and opinions, but actually undermine the stability and economy of countries.

"It is the duty of governments to give guidance without converting a democracy into a guided democracy.

"The line between merely guiding and being a guided democracy is difficult to draw. Too little guidance may result in irresponsibility, too much may negate democracy," he said at the opening of the Second Conference of Asean Information Ministers here.

Dr Mahathir said there may be many occasions when the two — stability and free flow of information — seemed incompatible.

"It is not easy, for example, to ban a newspaper or expel a journalist. You do not do such things without getting a bashing from the Fourth Estate and those who consider themselves holier than us.

"Tolerance must therefore be stretched to the

maximum but no tolerance is necessary when there is evidence of deliberate lies which undermine the nation.

"Rights and freedom are not free-standing entities. They must always be accompanied by a sense of responsibility.

"This can only come about through a process of formal and informal education regarding democracy," he said, adding that Information Ministries, agencies and government departments could play a big role in this area.

Dr Mahathir said stretching democratic rights to a point where the people suffered instability, insecurity and low or negative economic growth negated the objectives of democracy.

"Yet, in most instances, it is not democracy which is at fault but the failure to understand it or, worse still, the manipulation of

democracy by self-serving people.

"The mindless acceptance of someone else's interpretation of democracy and an unquestioning submission of certain practices, as for example the right to fabricate and tell lies, will undermine not only fledgling democracies but the democratic system as well.

"This, the countries of Asean can ill-afford," he said.

The Asean ministers attending the conference are Datuk Mohamed Rahmat (Malaysia), Pehin Datuk Isa Haji Ibrahim (Brunei), Mr Harmoko (Indonesia), Brig-Gen George Yeo and Mr Mechai Viravaidya (Thailand).

The Philippines was represented by its ambassador here, Mr Rodolfo Severino Jr.

Later at a press conference, Dr Mahathir said the recent Australian me-

dia's campaign against Malaysia was an example of how the media could lie and fabricate.

"They fabricate stories to entertain and make money out of it without caring for the results of their lies."

While agreeing that Malaysia was not perfect and not without faults, he said the Australian media should have been fair to Malaysia.

"You can report everything, our wrongs or rights. You can even concentrate on our wrongs provided they are facts," he said, adding that the Australian press reached the limits of freedom when it came to a stage of inventing bad things about others.

Dr Mahathir said he appreciated the Australian Government's explanation that it had no control over its media but "they (the government) should disassociate themselves

from the media."

Asked about the "banning" of the July 4 issue of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Dr Mahathir said he was not aware that the issue had been banned.

"I do not read the *Far Eastern Economic Review* because it is not an economic magazine. It is a political magazine. It should be called the *Far Eastern Political Review*.

"While other magazines give facts and figures on economic performances, *The Review* has nothing to do with economics," he said.

Asked whether the Government would take tough action against any press which fabricated lies, he said the people were intelligent enough to distinguish between truth and falsity.

"However, we draw the line when it comes to instigating race riots," he said.