

PM: Free Press is not licence to lie

By Ahmad A. Talib

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. — Governments are duty-bound to protect democracy and freedom, but they would be failing in their duty if they allowed the Press to abuse their freedom to spread lies. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The Prime Minister said: "Governments have a duty not only to protect democracy and freedom, but also to bring about the social and economic well-being of the citizens."

"While Governments should not suppress the truth, while there should be Press freedom and a free flow of information, Governments would be failing in their duty if they allow abuse of Press freedom to the extent that lies can be spread and the stability and economic well-being of the people undermined."

In a thought-provoking speech on Press freedom and democracy delivered when he opened the Asean Information Ministers conference today, Dr Mahathir said that democracy conferred on the people rights and freedom of action.

But rights and freedom were not free-standing entities. They must be accompanied by a sense of responsibility. In relation to this, the Prime Minister said that democracy could succeed if the people appreciated their rights and responsibilities.

Dr Mahathir argued further that it was the duty of Governments to give, some guidance on this without converting democracy into a guided democracy. The line between merely guiding and being a guided democracy was difficult to draw.

He said: "Too little guidance may result in irresponsibility, too much may negate democracy."

In this regard, the Prime Minister said that people who understood the way democracy worked and its limitations would be able to derive maximum benefit from the system.

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

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

Dr Mahathir observed that freedom of the Press was now accepted as an es-

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Dr Mahathir: Lies can be told to undermine stability of nations

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sential part of democracy. In addition, it was now accepted that the presentation of the news was also the right of those in the non-governmental information industry.

"But, of late, 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 to undermine the sta-

bility and even the economy of countries.

"And events have shown that the guardians and practitioners of Press freedom are not averse to using this unlimited licence. New and more telling ways are continuously being invented so that lies can be accepted as the truth."

The Prime Minister said that if freedom of the Press was to be meaningful, then everyone should be able to present his side of the story. What was being seen was a one-sided exercise of that freedom. Those who had no access to the world Press had no freedom.

He added that some years ago there was an attempt by poor countries to reform the international information order. Normally there was sympathy for the poor, but there was no sympathy shown to the poor nation's attempt to gain access to the international media and to get fair reporting.

One of the biggest United Nations agencies was threatened with a cut-off in its finances if it entertained the pleas of the poor nations.

And so with unseemly haste the new information order was jettisoned. The right to fabricate, to tell lies

and to do selective and slanted reporting about poor nations remained.

In this regard, Dr Mahathir asked: "Does freedom of the Press exist when only certain nations can air their versions of the truth and others may not?"

Information Minister Datuk Mohamed Rahmat said in his welcoming address the meeting would reaffirm the commitment to the ideals of Asean which, among other things, promoted understanding among the people and seeks ways to further strengthen political, economic and cultural relations.