

POOR STATES AT RECEIVING END: MAHATHIR

# Press freedom and lies

By AHIRUDIN ATTAN

GOVERNMENTS will 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.

This is because governments have a duty not only to protect democracy and freedom, but also to bring about social and economic well-being for their citizens, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said when opening the second conference of Asean information ministers in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

He said while freedom of the press is accepted as an essential part of democracy, it has also been accepted that lies can be fabricated in the name of press freedom.

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"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," he added.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir compared such press freedom to the "art of the half-truth" which was perfected by Nazi Germany's propaganda master, Dr Goebbels, during World War II. Even the most gentle Germans, he said, could be made into a beast if fed the kind of selected information that was cooked up by the Goebbels propaganda machine.

"We do not have a Dr Goebbels anywhere now. But when the world community accepts that press freedom confers the right to

fabricate and tell lies, then we are condoning at least a part of the practices of Dr Goebbels. The result may not be the brutes who terrorised Nazi Germany but certainly, there will be people sufficiently prejudiced as not to be able to see anything right about others," he added.

The Prime Minister said poor nations are the ones at the receiving end of such press freedom.

The evolution of a world press, which the rich English-speaking nations control, is an example where the non-English speaking nations which are also poor cannot have access to give their views or versions of whatever news are reported about them.

"As a consequence, the poor non-English speaking nations feel naked and defenceless. If free-

dom of the press is to be meaningful, then everyone should be able to present his side of the story. What we are seeing is a one-sided exercise of that freedom. Those who have no access to the world press have no freedom," he added.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir chided those who claim to fight for human rights, justice and fair-play.

"The question that must be asked is whether there is justice and fair-play when only certain people can influence the minds of the world community, and whether human rights is not denied when whole nations are deprived of their right of expression and their freedom to air their views.

"Does press freedom refer only to the freedom of those who control the press in a country and not to the freedom of the people to air

their views in the press? Does freedom of the press exist when only certain nations can air their versions of the truth and others may not?"

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir said the member states of Asean, in their efforts to become developed, can ill-afford to allow news fabrication and press lies to hinder their progress.

He urged the ministers to cooperate well. "It is important to remember that instability of one Asean member will affect the stability of the others and the region."

Ministers, senior ministry officials and representatives from Singapore, Brunei, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia are attending the three-day conference.