

PM: Let UN decide what is good govt

S 19 OCT 1991

HARARE: Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad took centre stage at the Commonwealth summit on Thursday, articulating the feelings of developing nations in a lengthy speech on democracy and good government.

"Who decides when one is not a good government or a good democracy?" he asked, while stating Malaysia's support for the principles of such fundamental issues.

He said if a donor country decided on its own that a certain government was bad and would, therefore, withdraw its support to that government, such a decision might be biased.

"It may be because that government is not friendly and not because the government is bad.

"We have seen in the past how dictatorships were supported by the western democracies because they were friendly."

The Prime Minister suggested a proper mechanism, or some third party, to "give the culprit a chance to defend himself."

"Hear his side also; maybe he has problems as to why he is not able to provide a good government."

"The United Nations is, I think, the right agency to decide, not just any country, however powerful, because there is bound to be bias and there may be other interests which come in when action is taken."

Wisma Putra secretary-general Datuk Ahmad Kamil Jaafar, who briefed journalists after the address, said the speech was well-received as many leaders congratulated Malaysia for articulating what they wanted to say.

Mrs Patsy Robertson, information director of the Commonwealth Secretariat, described Dr Mahathir's speech as "compelling and often funny."

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia believed in democracy but it was not a perfect system.

He noted that democracy had evolved through the years until it had reached the stage that was found in the developed countries today.

"But can we not excuse those people who are not yet fully developed if the stage of their democracy is not the same as those in

the developed countries?

"In fact, modern democracies in the West reached their present stage over a period of more than 100 years. How do you expect a country which has never known democracy to suddenly become democratic and be able to give its people all the things they expect to get from democracy?" he asked.

Dr Mahathir pointed out that many former British colonies were told to practise democracy the moment the British flag was lowered.

Most of these countries failed to make it work and they reverted to some form of authoritarian rule and now they were accused of not being democratic enough.

"Let us learn why and let us help them and not just with a stick over their heads."

Dr Mahathir noted that a multi-party state was not necessarily the best solution. A two-party system did not offer a choice if, both parties were bad. On the other hand, if

there were 40 or 50 parties, none of them would have an absolute majority to form a strong government capable of taking unpopular decisions.

He also touched on press freedom, saying that having the right to press freedom did not mean that "we should have journalistic licence to provoke, to tell lies merely because the papers have to sell and make money."

He said multi-racial nations like Malaysia were not easy to manage "as if you handle it wrongly, you will have a situation that assails some other countries at the moment."

He defended Malaysia's tough laws on detention and capital punishment for drug trafficking, adding that in countries which were democratic and where the laws were passed in accordance with procedures through the parliament, such laws must be respected.

Dr Mahathir said that sometimes it could go a little too far with all those democratic rights.

"To us, it is far more important that the community should have the rights, that the majority should have their rights and that the minority should not subvert the rights of the majority.

"We have to be very careful when we talk about press freedom and democratic rights because we are now living in a unipolar world where the option to defect to the other side is no longer available."

Dr Mahathir spoke at the last executive session that wrapped up a global review on a wide range of subjects on democracy, human rights, good government, problems faced by South Africa as well as the needs of smaller states.

The third day of the summit will also focus on environmental issues in a follow-up to the Langkawi Declaration.

Dr Mahathir attended Friday prayers before he and other heads of government made their traditional retreat to Victoria Falls where they will spend the weekend.