

PM: We are 'not gagging foreign Press

From Ahmad A.
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HONG KONG, Wed. — Malaysia welcomes the foreign Press to set up their regional offices in Malaysia and that the Government was not about to impose new restrictions on them, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The Prime Minister said he wished to correct the impression among some members of the foreign Press who felt that the recent official announcement that journalists would have to have passes was an attempt to restrict Press freedom and movement of its staff.

Dr Mahathir told members of the Hong Kong Foreign Correspondents' Club over lunch: "I wish to correct the wrong impression that Malaysia is about to put new restrictions on foreign correspondents. Actually, we are not contemplating such a thing.

"What we have done is to insist that journalists display their tags whenever they cover events or interview personalities. This is not uncommon. They are required to do this for security reasons.

"I myself wear my name tag on my coat everyday, in case people don't know who their Prime Minister is," he added amidst laughter from

the audience.

His address at the FCC was well attended with all seats taken up. In fact, three days before he was scheduled to speak, the booking for seats had closed. The FCC had to impose restricted attendance to foreign correspondents only, minus spouses or guests.

Closed-circuit television was made available for other Pressmen who covered the address, which was followed by a lively question-and-answer session.

Asked whether he intended to further liberalise the Press so as to promote a more free flow of information, Dr Mahathir said the Press in Malaysia was free.

That the Press was partisan was something that he readily admitted, he said.

He added that there were newspapers which were supportive of the Government but the public seemed not to notice occasions when the Press "hammers the Government".

He said the country's vernacular Press also hit out at the Government, raising questions about the accuracy and credibility of their reports. Many people read only the English papers, but if they read other newspapers they will find they are free to attack the Government and personalities.

He said: "The Press is free. The fact that they hap-

pen to side with one party or another is something that is common. There are newspapers in England which support the Conservatives and those which support the Labour Party."

The Prime Minister remarked that the country needed a responsible Press.

Reminding his audience, which represents a wide spectrum of the media, that Malaysia existed as a multi-racial society, Dr Mahathir said the country could not afford another 1969 (when racial riots threatened to destroy the country).

He stressed that in order to make the Press more responsible, they had to submit to certain laws.

"The Official Secrets Act doesn't apply to journalists alone, it applies to everybody . . . it's not meant to suppress information that is bad for the Government," he added.

He cited the recent issue of City Hall's purchase of 22 Volvos without permission. He added that certain action had to be taken.

"We don't suppress anything . . . it's good for the people to know about these things . . . but you can't say that journalists are exempted from the law because journalists are like everybody else — you break the law you face the consequences."

When a member of the

FCC (from the *Far Eastern Economic Review*) commented that the story regarding the purchase of the Volvos was made by a member of the country's tame Press, the Prime Minister retorted that he would not agree with the assumption that the Malaysian Press was tame.

Responding to the questioner's comments that the country's laws had led to the persecution of the reporter who wrote the Volvo expose and action taken on the Datuk Bandar, Dr Mahathir said no one has been persecuted because of the incident.

"I don't know where you get your information, but so far no one has been persecuted. The matter was also exposed by the Opposition, and we haven't taken any action against them as well," he said.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia did not subscribe to complete freedom where people walked naked in the streets. He said freedom in Malaysia had definite limits — one must behave and conform to standards set by society.

He was asked to elaborate on his views regarding the proposed East Asia Economic Caucus, the *hudud* laws which the Kelantan State Government intends to introduce and sustained development vis-a-vis the environment.