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MALAYSIA HAS NO QUARREL WITH AUSTRALIA, SAYS MAHATHIR

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LANGKAWI, Dec 8 (Bernama) -- Malaysia has no quarrel with Australia but most Malaysians have taken offence to the Australian leader's remarks about the Malaysian prime minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

He said the general feeling of Malaysians, including those expressed by opposition parties, condemning Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating for calling him a "recalcitrant", was genuine.

"(But) we are committed to our friends" Dr Mahathir said when responding to questions on Australia-Malaysia relations at a press conference here.

The Prime Minister refused to be drawn into saying more on this despite repeated questions and insistence particularly by Australian pressmen.

(Asked on the actions of several ministers and government agencies to boycott Australia or downgrade relations, Dr Mahathir said he was not in "the habit of telling my ministers what to do".

"Then, I might be labelled as dictator, et cetera", he said. -- more

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He however admitted that the ties between the two countries at present were at their lowest point although there were other times previously when "we were quite sore (with Australia), like when they accused us of slaughtering the Vietnamese (illegal immigrants)".

"If you want to criticize me, you can criticize. We have" also criticized the United Nations, the United States, China and others. Be free to speak your mind, it is part of democracy and is allowed in the international context.

"If you don't agree with a policy, say so. But not personal insult," he said.

Keating had called Dr Mahathir "recalcitrant" for not attending the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Seattle last month.

Asked again by the foreign press if there was a cultural difference in the ongoing controversy, Dr Mahathir said it might be a personal difference.

The prime minister also told the packed press conference that it was dangerous for him to comment from press reports about related issues that had arisen since Keating's remark.

"You tell me he has said certain things I have to verify them first (before commenting)," he said. -- more

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He also said that he had always accepted regrets and if "he (Keating) had expressed regret, we are happy to accept it."

"Why split hairs?" Dr Mahathir asked.

To another question, he said he had made public apologies in lesser situations before.

On the question of defence equipment, he said there was a need to update the equipment after some time.

Other countries were also doing the same thing and this should not be construed as being an arms race, he said, adding that China too was expected to upgrade its arms system especially now that it was more prosperous.

He said Malaysia also did not believe in the assumption of a power vacuum and this theory should be discarded.

"See what has happened in Bosnia. The U.S. has not been able to do anything ... and we can't rely on the assumed sense of responsibility of big power countries.

"There is no necessity for somebody to be policemen when we can't rely on those policemen," he said. -- Bernama

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