

Dr M: We will investigate

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. — The Government will investigate an Australian newspaper's allegation that the Australian Intelligence Service (ASIS) paid senior opposition politicians in Malaysia and Singapore tens of thousands of dollars in bribes over the past few years, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The Prime Minister said the Government would have to find out whether or not the allegation was true although it realised that this would not be an easy task as it would require the co-operation of the ASIS officers.

"If they (opposition members) are found to be doing something that is against the interest of the nation, I am quite sure we need to do something.

"But we have to be very careful about this because we don't want to be seen to be persecuting the opposition politicians.

"As you know, that is not a very popular thing. In fact, it is popular to persecute the Government but not to persecute the opposition," Dr Mahathir told reporters after opening the ninth biennial

meeting of the *Scientific Meeting of the Asian-Pacific Association for the Study of the Liver* here.

He was asked to comment on the allegation by Australia's *Sunday Telegraph* in a front-paged story on Jan 16.

Asked whether there was a need to set up a commission to investigate the matter, Dr Mahathir said there was no necessity to do so but the Government would follow the developments in Australia.

If the allegation was not reported in the Australian Press and if the matter had not been raised by former intelligence officers in Australia, the Government wouldn't know.

"I suppose if they raise it, they ought to know because they are the people involved," he said.

Dr Mahathir also said that he was unhappy if the Australians were trying to influence domestic politics by supporting the opposition financially.

Asked whether Malaysia would try to take it up with Australia to find out whether it is true, he said, "We will watch. I don't suppose that if you go and ask them,

they are going to say 'yes, we have committed this crime'. It is difficult."

The *Sunday Telegraph* had quoted former agents as saying that the payments were made without the full knowledge or consent of the Australian Government.

Such bribes, the former agents alleged, were paid from the time the leaders were junior politicians, increasing as they grew in stature.

Defence Minister and Umno vice-president Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said the onus was on members of the opposition parties to prove that they were not bankrolled by the Australian secret service, as alleged in the article.

"The opposition parties must now determine whether the allegation is true or not," he said after opening a one-day Asean chief executives symposium today.

"If it is true, then it is a serious matter, as it indicates foreign intervention in the local political process."

He said it could not be determined how far the allegation was true, and if it was, to what extent was the

opposition affected.

Perhaps, he said, more information would emerge later.

Najib also said that an investigation was in order to determine the validity of the allegation.

Meanwhile, Umno Youth has demanded a full Government investigation.

"If the report is true, we want a special investigation on how widespread it was and those who became the tools of the ASIS must be exposed," its head, Tan Sri Rahim Tamby Chik, said.

He said that if the report was true, Umno Youth regretted there were politicians willing to sell out their country and their own self-respect.

Gerakan urged the Government to investigate the allegation. Its central committee member, Dr S. Vijayarajam, said the allegation was very serious and those involved should be severely punished.

He said the Australian Government could not completely absolve itself from blame by disclaiming knowledge of the matter.

"It implies lack of responsibility and accountability