

PM: We will not arrest Arqam followers

GENTING HIGHLANDS, Sun. -- The Government will not seek the arrest of followers of the banned Al Arqam movement, said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today.

"We do not want to arrest the followers... we want to clarify to them the true teachings of Islam.

"The followers are not important... the problem is with their leaders, many of whom are still stubborn."

He was responding to a question on whether police would arrest followers of the movement who failed to adhere to the recent National Fatwa Council ruling.

Dr Mahathir was speaking to newsmen after witnessing the 3rd Asean Show Jumping Competition held at the Awana Horse Ranch. He is the patron of the Malaysian Equine Council.

Dr Mahathir said the Government, however, would continue to explain to these people why action had to be taken against them.

"Our objective is to clear confusion arising from the movement's deviant teachings. The Government also wants to inform the public as to why the Government has to take such measures," he said.

The Government also does not want the people to harbour suspicions over the Government's move and why it has to act against the Arqam movement.

"There are people who have already gone to the kampungs and levelled accusations against the Government that it was putting obstacles against the teachings of the Islamic faith," he said, adding that this was not true.

The Prime Minister also said it would take some time for Arqam leaders to change.

"It is a question of religion. If such leaders have

already believed in certain religious understanding, it would not be easy for them to change their thinking immediately."

On the movement leader Ashaari Muhammad, who had indicated that he would return to the country, he said:

"If he returns, the authorities will question him. If Ashaari continues to think he has the qualities of God and that he has spoken to Prophet Muhammad, we will take note of all these.

"We will take appropriate actions against him as provided by the country's laws and regulations."

On the question of extradition of Ashaari, he said this would only apply if a criminal offence had been committed.

On his discussion with Japanese Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama on the East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC), Dr Mahathir said there was positive response from Murayama.

"At least he did not reject the EAEC outright," he said, adding that he took the opportunity to explain to Murayama that EAEC was not a trade bloc but only a forum for discussion.

"The Japanese Prime Minister had not indicated any resistance and he wanted to study the concept of EAEC further," said Dr Mahathir, adding that the Government was patient. It would wait and achieve recognition for the EAEC ultimately.

Asked whether Japan's decision would be on condition that the United States be convinced of the EAEC, Dr Mahathir said: "I have already explained this to President Bill Clinton as I have explained to Murayama.

"What I do not understand now is what is still needed to be explained further on the EAEC."