

PM: We pay more heed to caring for environs

By
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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. — Although Malaysia is only a developing country, its emphasis on safeguarding the environment is far greater than that of industrialised countries, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

Dr Mahathir said: "In fact, we are the ones acting like the industrialised country here. They never gave a thought to their environment when they were developing. That's why they became developed.

"And now that they are developed, they are stopping others from doing this and that, things that they themselves were doing before.

"So, in this respect, although we are a developing country we are more conscientious towards our environment than other developing countries and even the developed countries which paid no heed to such issues when they were developing."

The Prime Minister said this when interviewed over a 45-minute *Bersama Perdana Menteri* (With the Prime Minister) programme aired on RTM tonight. He was asked to compare Malaysia's activities and policies *vis-a-vis* the environment with those of other countries.

Asked if he agreed with suggestions that the recent natural disasters, particularly the condominium collapse in 1993 and the landslide incident in Genting Highlands last month, were the result of "excessive development", Dr Mahathir said such tragedies were sometimes caused by development but they could also be natural phenomena.

He said: "We must be rational in dealing with such an issue and study it carefully, establish who is wrong and what was done that was deemed wrong. In the case of Genting, the study showed that it was a natural phenomenon."

To a follow-up question suggesting that existing development projects are taking place at a "seemingly uncontrollable" pace, which is evident from the number of hills in the Klang Valley and Penang that have been flattened to make way for projects, the Prime Minister said:

"We need development in these areas, but it is not necessarily to flatten the hills. This is the thing with our developers: the first thing they do is to flatten the area where the hills are. This is not necessary."

Dr Mahathir said in other countries, hills were also developed but without having to be levelled.

The Government, he added, had issued repeated directives that hills were not to be flattened or carved, "but sometimes the relevant parties seem to be ignoring them".

In view of this, the Government has decided that every development plan must be accompanied by a report and a map to pinpoint the location of the gradients

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and trees measuring more than 15cm in diameter. This is to help determine where buildings should be sited, where trees need to be felled, or hills flattened in the process.

"I am of the view that we do not need to flatten hills (and) many trees need not be felled if we are willing to make slight adjustments to the plans. And we have done. For example, the hotel in Langkawi," he said.

Asked if the Government will pursue a proposal to build the highway linking Genting Highlands, Frasers Hill and Cameron Highlands in view of the recent landslide incident in Genting, Dr Mahathir said:

"Yes, we are still proposing to do this. The important thing is how the roads are to be built. If we take into account the environmental impact and build the

roads properly, we are confident that tragedies such as that in Genting would not occur even though this may not be a 100 per cent guarantee.

"But in countries like Japan and Switzerland, where the countries are mountainous and there are no flat lands, hills are used for housing and roads. If we build the roads properly and well, there would not be accidents. Of course, there is no guarantee that this would not happen."

Dr Mahathir took a critical view of developers who build unattractive quarters-like houses, who fell trees and hills in an area in order to build as many units as possible. He said he had taken many pictures of such projects and shown them to the Cabinet and has also spoken to landscape artists, architects and all involved in this matter.

"But old habits die hard. I

don't know what else to do. We have asked them many times not to do it (cut trees and hills). For instance, near the Subang international airport, I remember there used to be small hills; now there are none. There is no natural beauty, gone totally.

"This is the thing with our developers, including our architects. Now we want everyone involved to be accountable."

To a suggestion that the root of the problem lies in the weakness in law enforcement, Dr Mahathir agreed. "I admit (that it is). We have issued so many directives, but sometimes they are not carried out on the ground. What has been decided in the Cabinet is sometimes not implemented; perhaps they (the officers) are not fully briefed. I myself do not know the reasons."

Asked whether it was true

as reported recently that the Science and Environment Ministry has no jurisdiction over development on hillslopes and highlands, the Prime Minister said the ministry has the authority to determine whether development in such areas could be undertaken.

To a suggestion that the recent natural tragedies may have been because Malaysia did not have the necessary construction technology or because some developers had cut corners, he said the latter was the more likely case.

"The Malaysian construction industry is quite sophisticated, actually. The only thing is that sometimes there are people who want to cut cost — what they called cut corners."

Asked whether he agreed with the observation by Tun Daim Zainuddin, the Economic Adviser to the Gov-

ernment, that high-rise buildings on hills could only be found in Malaysia, Dr Mahathir said: "Yes and no."

He added that in Hong Kong, for instance, skyscrapers were sited on top of mountains.

The Prime Minister said: "We must also remember that we do not have too many flat areas left. There are more hilly areas in Malaysia and we have no choice but to build tall buildings in certain areas."

"Like I've said, if we develop (these areas) with care, if we do not flatten the hills, and we take good care of the environment and its cleanliness, there is no reason to disallow such development."

"But let's not go to the extent that we see no more hills, only buildings ... like in Brinchang and also the peak of Genting Highlands."