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PM: DIFFERENT-SIZED PLAYERS MAKE "LEVEL-PLAYING FIELD" CALL MEANINGLESS

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 11 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today said the often-repeated call by developed countries to have a level playing field in trade and services was meaningless because of the different capabilities of the players concerned.

This was because players from developed countries were usually giants and those from developing countries were midgets, he said at a dialogue in conjunction with the national economic forum on the balance of payments deficit here.

"For that reason, we (developing countries) ought to be given handicaps. When you play golf you get a handicap. I don't see why you cannot get a handicap in trading. If we are small, we should be given shoes with high heels so that we can be about the same size as our opponents," he quipped.

Answering a query on whether the government was aware of moves by certain countries to introduce rules in the World Trade Organisation that would open up the markets of developing countries, Dr Mahathir said the government was aware of efforts to have lop-sided treaties and would always ensure a sense of fair play on these issues.

Referring to a call by developed countries to allow their companies to operate on a "national rights basis" in the country's services sector, Dr Mahathir said this may result in locally-incorporated companies disappearing because of severe competition.

For example, he said if large foreign banks were allowed to open up like Bank Bumiputra in Malaysia, they could afford to lose money here for several years as they could make their money elsewhere.

But if Malaysian banks lost money in Malaysia, there was no way they could be compensated, the prime minister said.

"Therefore it is important that we provide some protection for our own businesses until at least they are able to compete with their foreign competitors and they can go and open up in developed countries," he said.

At present, he said if Bank Bumiputra were to open up branches in the United States, it would hardly be noticed because of its small size. --
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