

28 DEC 1996

Storm-Mahathir

GIVE PRIORITY TO HELPING RAINSTORM VICTIMS, SAYS DR M

LANGKAWI, Dec 28 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today advised the people to give priority to relief work instead of trying to determine who was at fault for the rainstorm tragedy that has claimed more than 100 lives in Sabah.

"I think it is better for us to learn from the incident than to be quick at blaming others," the Prime Minister said.

Wednesday's tropical storm Greg which lashed the west coast of Sabah was something unusual that had never happened in the country before, he told reporters at the international airport here before returning to Kuala Lumpur after an unofficial visit to Langkawi.

"Although we have the ability to make weather forecasts, the predictions were often not precise enough, especially regarding their impact," he said.

Dr Mahathir said although the authorities tried their best to speedily disseminate information on adverse weather conditions, there were people who still took such warnings lightly.

Some residents in the affected areas might not move even if they had been forewarned of the tropical storm because they had not encountered this phenomenon before, he said.

Asked if an effective early warning system was needed to minimise the loss of lives and property damage in disasters, he said this matter would be studied and appropriate measures taken if necessary.

He dismissed suggestions that Malaysia was not in a position to cope with disasters like the one seen in Sabah.

"We are actually prepared to face disasters. But even a developed country like Japan could not prevent the earthquake that devastated Kobe," he said.

He said preparations made by Malaysia were far better than those of other developing countries.

Dr Mahathir advised employers not to build riverine houses for their workers but to let them stay in safer places.

Many of those killed in the rainstorm were sawmill and logging camp workers whose houses were swept away when the rivers overflowed their banks.

"We tend to make use of river banks because we treat rivers as a sewerage system. Therefore structures were built there, especially for the poor and squatters.

"In Perak (Pos Dipang), Orang Asli were killed because they erected houses on river banks...we must remember not to use rivers as a sewerage system," he said.

Dr Mahathir said he would study the situation before deciding whether to inspect the storm-ravaged areas in Sabah.

He thanked the Japanese government for extending a US\$100,000 aid to the storm victims in Sabah.

He also said the RM100,000 aid given out from the National Disaster Fund would be increased if necessary. -- BERNAMA

MT MFJ YBY