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Mahathir-Thai

MAHATHIR MEETS MALAYSIAN THAI COMMUNITY

By: Mohd Fisol Jaafar

ALOR SETAR, Jan 4 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today had his first formal meeting with the Malaysian Thai community in Kampung Akar, 40 km from here, the biggest settlement of Thai Malaysians in the country.

At the meeting, he announced the appointment of former Kedah Royal Customs and Excise Department director Charern Intachart, 56, as senator, the first Thai Malaysian to be made a member of the Senate.

Dr Mahathir said he was happy for the opportunity to formally meet the community for the first time because previously his intention to do so had to be deferred several times due to pressing official duties.

"This meeting is also to keep to the promise I made during the campaigning for the last general election," he told about 2,000 of the community who came from several states in the peninsula.

Charern said there were 50,000 Malaysians of Thai origin in Malaysia, the majority of them to be found in Kedah.

Speaking to reporters after the meeting, Dr Mahathir said the Thai community was one of several minority groups in the country who numbers were too small to be able to have an elected representative.

But, through appointment as a Senator, the representative of the Thai community -- as in the case of other minorities like the Portuguese and Indonesians -- could look after the interests of their communities, he added.

Charern is chairman of the Thai community coordinating committee.

In his speech at the meeting, Dr Mahathir said the Thai community in Malaysia had contributed much to national development.

They had assimilated well with other communities in the country and never caused any problems, he added.

"This is the beauty of Malaysia. All races can live in peace among one another. For example, in Sabah and Sarawak, I am told there are 86 ethnic groups who live in harmony," he said.

Dr Mahathir said only with peace and solidarity could development progress smoothly.

Many developed countries found it difficult to forge harmony among their multi-racial population, he added.

"The Bosnians and Serbs who are from the same breed and have a common language also cannot be friends, but fight," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the government had no intention to prohibit the communities in Malaysia from changing their way of living or culture; they were free to practise their culture and religion.

He then advised the rural people against being instigated by certain groups to oppose development.

Referring to such groups as "devils," he said when the government made plans to develop a kampung, such a group would instigate the people to reject it.

He urged the rural folk to accept the government's development plans, like the programme to resettle residents of new villages. He said: "Through the programme, it will be easier for the government to provide infrastructure facilities besides reducing costs.

"If the residents are dispersed, the development cost to the government will be higher."

Dr Mahathir said it was important for every citizen to realise that "we

cannot rely on others to safeguard our country."

Citing the kidnapping of 14 Bosnian Muslims by the Serbs, he said the commander of NATO forces there refused to help even after the Bosnian government made a request.

"The NATO commander said it was not the job for NATO (to help the kidnapped Bosnians) but that of the police," he said, calling the Nato commander a coward.

He also said Malaysians must prove that they could do whatever they desired through hard work and cooperation with one another.

"If our people quarrel and fight, our former colonialists the British will laugh at us. They will say Malaysia can only advance if they continue to rule. They say we do not know how to administer our country," he added.

At a press conference, Dr Mahathir said the government was willing to give specialised training to the minority communities so that they were not left out of the mainstream of national development.

"The government also wants to see the Thai community and other minorities progress together and enjoy all the facilities available," he added. -- BERNAMA