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Mahathir-Timor

PM CRITICISES NGOS FOR DEFYING CABINET DECISION

By: Rachman Nordin

ACCRA (Ghana), Nov 10 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has taken to task the organisers of the Second Asia Pacific Conference on East Timor (Apcet II) for defying the Cabinet's decision to disallow it to be held in Malaysia.

"Rightly, they should follow the government's decision. We do not want to do something which will only damage our relations with our neighbour. This is an irresponsible act," he said.

The government will take action if the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which organised the conference were found to have breached the laws, he told Malaysian journalists covering his official visit to Ghana on Saturday.

Dr Mahathir was asked to comment on an incident yesterday when a group calling itself the "Barisan Bertindak Rakyat" (People's Action Front) barged into Hotel Asia in Kuala Lumpur where the conference on East Timor was being held and attempted to stop it.

Police were called in to restore order and some of the Action Front members were detained.

The Cabinet recently decided not to allow the conference to be held in Malaysia and urged the organisers to call it off.

East Timor was annexed by Indonesia in 1976 after it intervened in a civil war in the former Portuguese colony.

Asked whether the government would take action against the NGOs concerned, Dr Mahathir said: "If they flout the laws, we will take action."

He questioned the wisdom of the NGOs in organising the conference which would not be able to solve the East Timor issue.

"They won't be able to free East Timor or get whatever it is they are demanding by having demonstration or seminar," he said.

Umno Youth head Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, who is a member of the Prime Minister's delegation here, confirmed that he instructed Umno Youth to take action to stop the conference from being held.

He said the action was to protect the image of Malaysia and because the Umno Youth understood the "sensitivity of Indonesia in handling its internal affairs".

Zahid defended Umno Youth's action against the conference as a political action.

"We consider the conference as illegal. We were only obstructing an illegal conference," he said.

He urged the Home Ministry to take long term action by imposing restrictions on NGOs which "want to show that they are more powerful than the government".

Zahid advised Malaysian NGO leaders and members to respect the stand of the government not to hold conferences of such nature in the country. --

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