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Mahathir-Bakun

PM SADDENED BAKUN PROJECT KICKED AROUND LIKE A FOOTBALL

KUALA LUMPUR, June 27 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today he is disappointed the Bakun hydro-electric project has been turned into a "football" and kicked around without taking into account that it is a national project that will ensure cheap electricity supply in future.

"I am saddened because the Bakun project has become like a football...being kicked around by people despite its benefits, especially to the poor, through making available job opportunities and other side benefits," the Prime Minister told reporters at Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah International Airport in Subang on his return from vacation abroad.

Dr Mahathir refuted a misconception that the RM13.6 billion project was implemented to help his friend Tan Sri Ting Pek Khiing, the executive chairman of Bakun developer Ekran Berhad.

He said the mega project could not be implemented except through privatisation because the government has no means to finance it.

The Prime Minister criticised the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which, according to him, want to frustrate implementation of the project, including resorting to the courts.

The High Court on June 19 ruled as invalid the Environment Quality (Prescribed Activities) (Environmental Impact Assessment) Amendment Order 1995, which allowed the Sarawak government to approve the EIA report for the Bakun project.

It also declared that Ekran must comply with EIA procedures under the Environmental Quality Act.

"I was actually briefed on the Bakun project more than 20 years ago when I was the Deputy Prime Minister. At that time, its cost was estimated at only RM10 billion," Dr Mahathir said.

Even then, he said, the government did not have the means to implement it.

"This is not a question of helping a friend," he added.

Asked for his opinion on the court judgement, Dr Mahathir said the government will respect it and is willing to take the necessary measures to correct the procedures in order for the project to continue without too long a delay.

He said the cost of the project will rise and the developer stands to lose millions of ringgit for each day that it is delayed.

"If the decision of the High Court is overturned by the Court of Appeal, are the NGOs prepared to pay compensation to Ekran?" asked Dr Mahathir.

The Prime Minister said NGOs in Malaysia have been made use of by foreign NGOs to oppose the Bakun project and they only wanted to see the project stopped without counting the cost to the country.

"In fact, all these things were started from outside the country and NGOs here are only followers. Our NGOs have been manipulated and they let themselves be manipulated by foreigners.

"I have personally seen forests in foreign countries that have been destroyed but Malaysian NGOs never complained about this.

"Why should other NGOs be concerned with Malaysia and Malaysian NGOs are not concerned about those countries where human rights are being ignored?" he asked.

Asked whether he believed the judgement on the Bakun project was proof of interference by foreign NGOs in the country, Dr Mahathir said: "I don't

know about the judgement on Bakun but the NGOs brought this thing to the court."

"They brought this to court after taking the cue from foreign NGOs who do not have the interest of Malaysia at heart."

Dr Mahathir said he could work with local NGOs if their actions are reasonable and take into consideration the interest of their own country.

"I am disappointed that Malaysian NGOs are so completely irresponsible and have no feeling of love or patriotism for their country," he said.

"It is time for our NGOs to think as Malaysians and they should also monitor what is happening in Europe, America and other countries.

"Those countries have built their dams without having problems with the NGOs...they have benefited and are getting cheap electricity."

The Prime Minister said he was also disappointed that many quarters still did not understand the objective of the Bakun project and its benefits.

He said the project, which will have a capacity to generate 2,400 megawatts of electricity, is necessary because it will be a source of cheap power in the long term compared to oil, gas, coal or thermal energy which will increasingly cost more.

"The Bakun dam will only depend on rain, and the cost of rain now and in 10 years time will not change," he said.

He urged the mass media to help explain the project to the people, saying Malaysia could not afford the cost of disruption to the project which is meant to profit the people and country.

Dr Mahathir said developed countries which exploited their water resources have built hydro-electric dams at a time when they were richer than Malaysia is currently.

"We must realise that we in Malaysia are still poor (compared to the developed nations) but our NGOs are an obstacle to the well-being of our people," he said.

For instance, he said, there are foreign NGOs which instigated some groups in Sarawak to oppose the government with blowpipes.

"I wrote a letter to the previous Prime Minister of Canada, I said it is irresponsible of them to instigate our people to fight against the police. The police would get killed and might have to shoot those responsible. But the reply I got, unfortunately, was that...well, this is democracy." -- BERNAMA

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