

25/09/1997

Anwar: We're ready to give more to tackle haze woe

Baidura Ahmad in Hong Kong

MALAYSIA is willing to allocate more money to tackle the haze problem notwithstanding the austerity drive to slow down major development projects as well as cut government spending.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim said: "The welfare of our citizens is paramount.

"We will not risk their health and life. If need be, we will cut from other allocation to spend on fire fighting."

Anwar was speaking at a Press conference yesterday before leaving for home after attending the annual IMF/World Bank meeting.

When asked which of the problems, the haze or financial crisis, were more important to the Government, Anwar said:

"In Hong Kong, the financial (crisis). In Sarawak, it is the haze. But for Malaysia, it is both."

Anwar who also met financial experts, economists and foreign fund managers, was asked about the effect of the haze on the economy in relation to consumer spending and tourist arrivals, among others.

"I assured them that we are doing everything possible to overcome this problem.

"Of course, we would like to see Indonesia doing more in assisting us and our neighbours because it will affect not only the welfare and life of our citizens but also the economy.

"But I told them that this problem is very temporary.

"We have the northeast and southwest monsoons coming. The haze will be cleared. "

Asked whether the Government had prepared any estimate on the losses, Anwar said: "Not really but we believe it is not substantial."

Anwar was also asked on the perception among delegates as well as the media that he had been hard-pressed to remedy the negative repercussions arising from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's controversial remarks on the currency crisis.

"It is not a matter of patching (up). Sometimes, we need to clarify because people may not fully understand the Malaysian political scenario and requisitions, and the forthright and frank manner of Dr Mahathir.

"Not many leaders in the developing world would speak up and, therefore, I think there is a need to appreciate the general concern of many in the region on this matter," Anwar added.

Dr Mahathir and US fund investor George Soros, who have been invited by the World Bank to speak at separate seminars, have been pitted against each other in the foreign media in a war of words.

New Zealand Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Winston Peters lend thinly-veiled support to Dr Mahathir in his speech when he said:

"Those who trade in Asian currencies are not merely taking positions as the traders, they are participating in a social and economic system.

"It is sad that in the recent exchanges of opinion some have chosen to question Asian values.

"This questioning seems to reflect a Eurocentric vision, and short-term financial focus.

"This narrow approach is alarming because any international exchange must be based on mutual understanding and respect."

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