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Call to review human rights charter backed

MALAYSIA has found allies in Indonesia, Philippines and China in its call for a review of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights but the US and the European Union oppose such an initiative.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas, Philippine Foreign Secretary Domingo L. Siazon Jr and Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen yesterday expressed support for a revision of the 49-year-old Declaration.

Economic Adviser to the Government Tun Daim Zainuddin had made the suggestion on Saturday which was supported by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad the following day.

Alatas, speaking at a joint press conference at the end of the Post Ministerial Conference in Petaling Jaya yesterday, said: "I don't think we should be absolutists in saying that there is no place for a review.

"... (a review) is not to dilute anything... we want to see if we can create a better balance... in response to the real situation in the world," he said.

Furthermore, there are now some 120-odd developing and newly independent countries which did not participate in the debate to draft the 1948 Declaration.

Alatas expressed surprise that Daim's suggestion was interpreted as an attempt to dilute individual rights.

"I don't think that is necessarily or automatically the purpose. Everybody knows that human rights do not only consist of individual political and civil liberties. People are now more aware that economic, cultural and social rights are just as important," he said, adding that there should be proportionality in treating all these rights.

Daim had proposed a review of the Declaration in the interest of all parties and as part of the ongoing process to reform the UN structure. Dr Mahathir said Malaysia may submit a proposal to the UN to pursue the matter.

The Declaration contains 28 articles which cover civil and political rights like freedom of speech, movement, association and education.

Siazon said the Philippines believes a review, of any of the UN charters, would lead to improvements.

"We may not agree on the basic objective of a review but I don't think anyone should contest the need for one, of any document of any system, after a certain time," he said.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who chaired the joint press conference, said the Human Rights Convention is a huge one.

"We are aware that some countries are against (a review)... I do not expect the US to say yes... The US may have strong views on human rights, so do we."

Abdullah said countries which attended the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993 had only discussed their own political experiences and expectations but stopped short of calling for a revision of the Declaration.

Qian, speaking through an interpreter, said there are over 60 covenants on human rights and not one country has acceded to all of them.

China, he said, has acceded to 17 while the US, the self-proclaimed champion of human rights, has ironically acceded to only 15.

"I know that the US has done many human rights reports on many countries but it has not done one on its own situation.

"Instead, we (China) have done reports on the US human rights situation. But I don't see much (coverage of the matter) in the media," he added.

Meanwhile, EU representative Michiel Patijn, who is the Foreign Secretary of the Netherlands, said the EU is "slightly surprised that the issue of a review of the UN Charter of Human Rights was brought up."

"Members of the EU absolutely refuse to agree to such an exercise," he said.

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright had said during the "Asean Plus One" meeting, chaired by Indonesia, that the US will be "relentless in its opposition to any attempt to water down the Declaration."

US Undersecretary for Economic, Business and Agricultural Affairs Stuart E. Eizenstat, speaking at the joint press conference, found it "remarkable" that there is a serious effort to "dilute the universal values of individual rights".

The US has always viewed itself as "a society that is in search of improvement and perfection," he said.

"... we know we have not reached (perfection) in human rights or in any other areas. We have a long way to go from being perfect."

He said US does not vary its human rights campaign according to the size of a country or in terms of how much it values the bilateral relations.

"We try to call them as fair as we can.

"We certainly do not mince our words.

"We don't discriminate. We are only responding to the universal UN Declaration," he said.

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