

25/04/1997

Dr M: US in no position to dictate to Asean

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the United States was not in a position to dictate who Asean should befriend and who it should not.

Asked to comment on the economic sanctions imposed by the US on Myanmar, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia felt strongly against such drastic measures.

"I don't know about other Asean members but I am certainly going to make a very strong stand on this. I don't like people telling me who I should have as my friend and who should be my enemy. I develop my own enemies.

"We are an independent country and we want to behave like an independent country.

"It's bad enough that we are not allowed to form the EAEC (East Asia Economic Caucus). Of course, we can go ahead but other members are being stopped from joining the EAEC.

"I thought that this is going to be a free world. What free world?"

Dr Mahathir was speaking to reporters after chairing the National Information Technology Council meeting at the Prime Minister's Department.

Asked whether Malaysia had changed its stance on sanctions as it had supported sanctions against South Africa but not Myanmar, Dr Mahathir said:

"There has been no change. When we supported sanctions against apartheid in South Africa, the sanction was actually demanded by the ANC (African National Congress)... by the people of South Africa. They wanted the sanctions. They were prepared to pay the price.

"But the people of Myanmar did not invite sanctions except maybe for (Nobel Prize winner) Aung San Suu Kyi who has her own political agenda. The sanctions will affect the people of Myanmar, not the Government.

"The Government will live in fine style if they want to. I have seen sanctions in many places. It doesn't affect the Government. Sanctions against Iraq have affected the people of Iraq, not the Government of Iraq, not the leaders of Iraq. So you should not impose that kind of thing on people. It's not fair."

On whether the sanctions ended apartheid in South Africa, Dr Mahathir said: "Part of it, I think. But the most important thing is the people, like (former President F.W.W.) De Klerk, realised that there is no future in apartheid."

On whether Malaysia supported Suu Kyi, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia was only supporting the inclusion of Myanmar into Asean.

"If they want to change their Government, they are still in Asean. If they don't want to change their Government, that is their state. We don't want to question whether they are democratic or not.

"In Asean today there are Governments which can be considered as democratic and Governments which are said to be undemocratic.

"As you know Malaysia is accused of having an undemocratic Government. So do we expel ourselves from Asean because of that?"

Dr Mahathir said at the moment Asean accepted the State Law and Order Restoration Council as the Government of Myanmar.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia's relations with South Africa was severed in 1964 by the then Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman.

"We lost a lot of money because of that. But we were willing to lose money because we have principles."

Yesterday, Dr Mahathir said Asean would work very hard to admit Myanmar

into the grouping.

Malaysia is the current chairman of Asean which groups Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Asean Foreign Ministers are scheduled to meet here on May 31 to discuss when to admit Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos into the grouping.

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