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Dr M urges Cambodia to be patient

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Cambodian leaders should exercise patience and good sense to ensure that the country's coalition Government would be admitted into Asean.

"We are watching to see the credibility of the process that is taking place in Cambodia.

"As soon as we are satisfied and they (Cambodia) continue to express their wish to join Asean ... of course, we will give it serious consideration," the Prime Minister said.

On whether there would be a positive solution to the Cambodian crisis, Dr Mahathir said: "We have faced problems before and we will overcome them."

Dr Mahathir was responding to questions when speaking to local and foreign reporters after opening the 30th Asean Ministerial Meeting at the Sunway Lagoon Resort Hotel yesterday.

Among those present were Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Indonesia's Foreign Minister Ali Alatas. When asked if Cambodia's inclusion in the Southeast Asia regional coalition would be envisioned by the end of this year, Dr Mahathir said it was possible.

"I received a letter from Cambodia's Second Prime Minister Hun Sen welcoming Asean's initiative with regard to the coalition assisting in seeking a solution to the problem of political stability.

"While I was on leave (in Europe), I spoke to Ranariddh over the telephone and he explained the situation in Cambodia, asking for a sympathetic consideration."

On Asean's view of the recent developments in Cambodia, Dr Mahathir said:

"As you are aware, the Government with two Prime Ministers was a result of an international action in trying to solve the problem in Cambodia.

"There was an election and the result of the election was very clear ... in order to accommodate all the parties in Cambodia, it was decided to have a Government with two Prime Ministers."

And, Dr Mahathir added, if that decision was going to be terminated, it must be done in a proper way, through elections.

"What we have seen was that the First Prime Minister was removed not according to the process ... free from force.

"There was some force used and I think that is not provided in their constitution."

On the possibility of Cambodia's National Assembly electing another Prime Minister to replace Ranariddh, Dr Mahathir said: "Then we will have to see if all members of the Assembly are able to participate willingly.

"We should hope those who are eligible to participate in the National Assembly should be able to do so ... free from any form of pressure and coercion."

Asked if Asean would send a watchdog committee to monitor the situation in Cambodia, Dr Mahathir replied in the negative.

"We do not have such a body and do not intend to establish one... We are not watching anybody."

Asked what mediator's role Asean would play in resolving Cambodia's predicament, Dr Mahathir said: "We are not mediating.

"We are merely saying that in order to join Asean, certain conditions have to be met."

Dr Mahathir also denied that Asean's role could be considered as "constructive intervention", as suggested by a foreign journalist.

"You can call it whatever you want

"We are trying to be as neutral as possible and at the same time, we also feel there is a need to avoid the use of force in issues like these."

On whether Asean should review their non-interference policy, Dr Mahathir said this was not necessary.

"We are still on the right track... We do not need to meddle in the internal affairs of other member countries.

"But to join the regional coalition, it is Asean who decides.

"Countries cannot say that they have a right to join Asean.

"It is Asean which determines who can join. We are not asking them to do anything except to accept the fact that Asean has certain views about who can join them."

When asked to comment on Hun Sen's latest announcement that if Cambodia was not allowed into Asean, he would go beyond to seek assistance, Dr Mahathir said: "He is entitled to his say... We to ours.

"But, if we were to react to what others say and not sit down and discuss issues seriously ... There wouldn't be an Asean today.

"Asean does not believe in issuing public statements but sitting across the table and discussing.

"Of course, we are entitled to issue statements just like Hun Sen... But that is not a form of negotiation."

Dr Mahathir was also asked whether his criticism against certain powerful countries in his speech could foil attempts to attract investors to Malaysia, especially to the Multimedia Super Corridor, Dr Mahathir said businessmen of those countries need not necessarily support the actions of their Governments.

"Companies have come here and invested in Malaysia. Those same companies are not very happy with the kind of pressure exerted by the G7. We must not assume that the businessmen of those countries support the actions of their Governments."

Citing an example, Dr Mahathir said a delegation of American businessmen who came to Malaysia had voiced their support for Asean's decision to admit Myanmar into the grouping.

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