

31/01/1997

Dr M: MAS doing all it can to overcome problems

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ALOR STAR, Thurs. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today Malaysia Airlines was doing everything it could to overcome its problems, stressing that it needed time to overcome them, particularly those pertaining to the reported shortage of pilots and aircraft.

Speaking to reporters on his arrival from Kuala Lumpur at Sultan Abdul Halim airport to join Universiti Utara Malaysia staff and students in breaking the fast, Dr Mahathir said the Government had not given MAS a time-frame but it hoped the airline would be able to solve its problems as soon as possible.

The Prime Minister was asked by reporters whether the Government was confident that MAS would be able to overcome its problems.

"I am confident that everything is being done but in the issue of pilots and aircraft, the target cannot be achieved overnight. It takes time," he said.

Asked whether there were any proposals made to the Government to take over MAS, Dr Mahathir said: "At the moment, there is none."

On whether there was any attempt by certain quarters to topple MAS chairman Tan Sri Tajudin Ramli, Dr Mahathir said there was talk that if Tajudin failed, the airline would be given to someone else.

"It is also possible that the bad reports on MAS are aimed at bringing down the price of MAS shares," he added.

Asked whether the MAS issue was politically motivated, Dr Mahathir said: "I don't know ... no politics."

On Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik's statement on Tuesday that the problems faced by MAS had affected the tourism industry, Dr Mahathir said they had affected the industry to a certain extent.

The Prime Minister said the problems were the result of the airlines' expansion.

"MAS is having problems because we asked them to fly to more destinations ... increase flights and new routes. That means it has to increase its staff but this is not an easy task," he said.

For example, Dr Mahathir said, before Tajudin took over the airlines, MAS flew only eight times a week to London.

"But when he took over, we flew 14 times a week to London ... almost double. Are we also doubling the number of pilots?" he asked.

The Prime Minister said before Tajudin took over, many MAS aircraft were not flying.

"Now he has put all the planes in the air and when we want to fly all the aircraft, we need staff and it is not easy to upgrade their skills.

"It is easy for factories ... we can just ask the workers to come for walk-in interviews and immediately go to work."

"Even to be a stewardess, one needs to have experience," he said, adding that some staff quit their jobs after getting married.

Asked why MAS stopped sending its trainees to Mofaz Flying School in Langkawi when it was facing a shortage of pilots, Dr Mahathir said many MAS pilots had graduated from the school.

"But they cannot immediately fly commercial aircraft.... Training is one thing and flying a (Boeing) 747 is another.

"A pilot who has just graduated from Mofaz cannot immediately fly a 747. If he is allowed to pilot a 747 after completing his training at Mofaz

then I myself will not fly," he said in jest.

Asked whether the Government was worried over all the negative reports on MAS, Dr Mahathir said other airlines too had their own problems.

"If we take the trouble to travel on other airlines and look for their weaknesses, we find that they are worse. There are airlines (stewardess) who throw food at us but we don't complaint.

"But we feel responsible when it's our airline and that's why when we make a slight mistake, we exaggerate.

"Like the two cholera cases in Penang ... we over-exposed them and people stopped coming. But in countries where there is endemic cholera, they don't talk about it at all," he said.

On the Government's directive to States that stricter conditions be imposed on entertainment centres, Dr Mahathir said the Government planned to draft new laws pertaining to drug abuse at the centres.

He said under the proposed law, operators could be charged with trafficking dadah if there was evidence of drug abuse at their outlets.

"We will hold the operators or management responsible if there is evidence of drug abuse at their outlets and consider them as being involved in dadah trafficking.

It was reported on Monday that the Government had directed State Governments to keep a close watch on entertainment centres because such places had been identified as the hotbed of social ills.

Dr Mahathir said the move was necessary because there had been many reports that entertainment centres were being misused.

"We allow people to entertain themselves. However, we find there are many such places where Ecstasy pills are being used.

"... that is more than entertainment," he said, adding that the Government had no problems with genuine entertainment centres but had to step in when widespread use of psychotropic pills like Ecstasy was detected.

Asked how the stringent conditions would affect tourism, Dr Mahathir said: "It will affect tourism a little but we will watch and see. People can still go because entertainment centres will still be open until midnight or lam."

On requests that tourism spots be exempted from the ruling, Dr Mahathir said: "We cannot exempt them because we find more locals than tourists frequenting such places."

On the alleged log smuggling issue in Sabah, Dr Mahathir said while the police and Anti-Corruption Agency were investigating the matter, he had issued a directive that no statements should be issued by any quarters.

Dr Mahathir said he had received letters and reports both from the Primary Industries Ministry and the Sabah Government on the matter and had forwarded them to the ACA.

On illegal immigrants, Dr Mahathir said they had become a burden to the Government.

"The problem has reached a serious stage as most of them do not have proper work. We have to place them in detention centres and give them food ... and they become a burden to us."

Dr Mahathir stressed that the Government was not against foreign workers and in fact did provide opportunities for them to work in the country.

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