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Mahathir-US

GOVT CAN'T STOP PEOPLE FROM EXPRESSING FEELINGS, SAYS MAHATHIR

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 18 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today the government cannot tell Malaysians to stop expressing their feelings and support when their country and leaders are criticised.

"We can't just say now stop. It's not possible. This is something which the people feels.

"While we can stop, you can't stop people not to show their feelings when they have such high feelings," he told reporters after launching the one-village-one-product campaign and Oita Prefecture 1997 Tourism Promotion at the Mall here.

Dr Mahathir was asked to comment on the statement by US ambassador John Malott yesterday that Washington and Kuala Lumpur should stop bickering to safeguard bilateral ties.

The Prime Minister said Malaysians have the right to speak their mind and express their feelings.

"It is not so easy to switch off things, something that has been started like this. You just do not switch off," he said referring to the draft resolution by 34 US congressmen asking him to apologise for making allegedly anti-Jewish remarks or resign.

Dr Mahathir stressed that the expression of feelings and support by Malaysians for him and the country was not pre-arranged by the government.

"We don't orchestrate these things (show of support). In fact, we have been telling the people not to have all these gatherings," he said.

He cited his recent visit to Pulau Pinang as a case in point.

The people there wanted to show their support for him in many places although they were told to hold the gathering only at the airport.

"But they said we (they) can't all go to the airport and that they all wanted to gather and meet the Prime Minister and tell him about our (their) support at all the places," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the government could not tell the people "Please Stop Saying Something" when they have been told that people should be free to express their opinions.

"As much as when they criticise the government, we don't stop them. When they criticise other people, we can't stop them also. That is what is freedom of speech all about," the prime minister said.

On Malott's statement that some US congressmen were not satisfied with the prime minister's clarification on the alleged anti-Jewish remarks, Dr Mahathir said: "Yes, as much as they refuse, our people also refuse to accept an order by the government to stop expressing their feelings."

"So, it's not easy to stop people. They (the US congressmen) have a right to say something and our people also have the right to say something," he said.

When a reporter told Dr Mahathir that the tone of Malott's statement implied that Malaysia has a lot to lose if it severs ties with the US, the prime minister said both countries would lose.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia would not break ties with the US as a result of the latest development in Washington.

"We don't want to sever ties with the United States and this is not of our own doing.

"We have already explained that we didn't say those things (being anti-Jewish) but they insisted upon doing these things (to table the resolution) and people feel very unhappy, very angry about this thing. We

can't just switch on and switch off things," he said.

Asked how he would describe Malaysia-US ties, Dr Mahathir said as far as the two governments were concerned, there was nothing wrong.

"It's just that this Congress people's (action)," he said.

On Malott's statement that Americans were being blamed for everything that went wrong in Malaysia, the prime minister said it was not true.

"We are not blaming the Americans. It is not true," he said.

Dr Mahathir however said the foreign press have been doing damage to the country's image when they reported about the recent haze which enveloped Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries.

"The (foreign) press reported about the haze being very serious but when the sky is clear, they never report anything.

"In fact, in one day, the report was repeated 15 times that there is haze in Malaysia. And as a result, the hotels have to endure a lot of cancellations until next year. So, I think if you want to report something bad about Malaysia, at least report also that things have improved," he said.

On the Barisan Nasional Supreme Council's decision today reaffirming support for Dr Mahathir's leadership, the prime minister said: "Again, that is the feeling that they have. I think they have a need to express it." --
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