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Handcuffs unnecessary (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today described as unnecessary the handcuffing of schoolchildren suspected to be involved in dadah, adding that the police should use their discretion when dealing with juveniles.

Dr Mahathir, who is also Home Minister, hoped that such action by the police would not recur as it would put the children under tremendous pressure.

"They should not have handcuffed the schoolchildren. Perhaps, the police were following normal practice, but I think when it involved matters like these, the police should have used their discretion.

"It could be because there was no instruction on this. However, this does not mean that action will not be taken against the students involved.

"I feel action should be taken against these children (students involved in crime) but there is no need to handcuff them. Just bring them in," he said after attending the Prime Minister's Department's Kongs Raya open house.

Dr Mahathir was asked whether the recent police handcuffing of the schoolchildren, aged between 11 and 17, was appropriate.

In the incident in Muar on Monday, 13 pupils, including three primary school children, were arrested in anti-dadah raids. They were handcuffed and taken to the police station.

Dr Mahathir said such offences by schoolchildren should be made public so that they would not get the impression that it would be all right for them to commit wrongdoings because their actions would not be known to the public.

This, he said, was because the problem of student involvement in criminal activities, including dadah trafficking and abuse, was "very serious" and society was no longer in a position to hide it.

"I feel that if it has reached a stage where schoolchildren are involved, it is serious, very serious.

"That is the reason why we are open about the matter. Until now, most of us wanted to hide it. We did not want to show our weaknesses."

He said there was an increasing number of students involved in secret society activities as well as dadah trafficking and addiction.

Since early this week, police have picked up 78 pupils from at least 16 schools in Malacca, Johor and Pahang, on suspicion of dadah involvement, gambling and gangsterism.

Dr Mahathir said society must take a stand whether to leave the students to their criminal activities or to act to stop the scourge from spreading.

"If we do not act, I believe that soon our own children will be involved in dadah," he said.

Asked whether he felt that the Education Ministry had failed to play a role in maintaining discipline in school, Dr Mahathir said:

"They (the ministry) are trying to discipline the students. But disciplining children not only involves teachers and the ministry but also the parents.

"Some parents are not concerned about their children, and when the school takes disciplinary action against their children, they criticise the school."

He said if this was the case, it would be difficult for the Government to act against indiscipline.

"Are we going to allow such problems to persist because we do not want to hurt people's feelings or are we going to take action to solve it?" he asked.

On whether checks should be carried out in all schools to determine the actual number of pupils involved in dadah, Dr Mahathir said:

"The Government does not have the resources to check all schools as the number of pupils are far too many.

"Therefore, all parties including the teachers, disciplinary teachers, headmasters, the Education Department and the public should come forward and assist."

He said all parties were in the habit of passing the buck when it came to discipline among schoolchildren, and refused to accept responsibility.

Meanwhile, Deputy Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Samsuri Arshad said all policemen had been told to act reasonably when dealing with juveniles.

"The principle of an arrest is the use of reasonable action to prevent the escape of a suspect.

"And if the officer-in-charge believes handcuffs are suitable for a particular child or juvenile, it is entirely up to him," said Samsuri.

He said although he had yet to be briefed on what had happened in Muar, he believed the investigating officer might have felt the need to handcuff the schoolchildren as there was a group of them.

"If the suspect is a child below the age of 12, then it will seem reasonable not to use handcuffs," he said.

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