

18/11/1997

Let's improve relations, says US ambassador

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - United States Ambassador to Malaysia John R. Malott today said it was inappropriate for the 34 United States Congressmen to call for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's resignation.

Malott, describing his return to Malaysia after a two-week vacation in Europe, as "walking into the hornets' nest", said:

"I agree that it is inappropriate to call upon the leader of a foreign country to resign. There - I said it, and probably I have just gotten 34 members of Congress mad at me - people who have some influence over me and my future.

"But I am willing to display this political courage in talking about the resolution because I believe it is the right thing to do and because I believe strongly in the importance of the relationship (between Malaysia and the US)."

However, he acknowledged the Congressmen's right to express their concern over the alleged anti-Semitic and anti-American remarks made by Dr Mahathir.

"If you make my comments on the Congressional resolution your headline tomorrow and miss the far more important part of my message, then I will be concerned. My message today is about the importance of our relationship and the growing partnership that we have been building."

Malott was commenting on the action by 34 US Congressmen led by Robert Wexler (Democrat-Florida) to move a draft resolution in the US Congress calling on Dr Mahathir to apologise for his alleged anti-Jewish remarks, failing which, he should resign as Prime Minister.

Dr Mahathir has, on several occasions, clarified that he did not say that a Jewish conspiracy was behind the attacks on several Southeast Asian currencies.

Malott said it was incumbent upon everyone, on both sides of the ocean, to improve relations between the two countries and to stop irresponsible "America-bashing".

"I am concerned by the growing apparent belief among some people that there is some benefit to be derived from engaging in America-bashing and trashing the ties between the two countries, which I believe are so important to both countries.

"I am concerned about the growing tendency to blame everything that is happening on foreigners, usually Americans, or on the Press, usually American-owned.

"I am shocked to read editorial opinions that foreign publications should be banned in Malaysia or that the Central Intelligence Agency is conspiring with the foreign Press to bring down the Prime Minister," Malott said.

He also expressed surprise that an American television network was blamed for the decline in foreign tourists, saying that it was the haze from the forest fires in Indonesia that was responsible.

He said when the embassy carried out its duty to inform US citizens that the mission had received threatening phone calls, Malaysian newspapers claimed that it was not doing its job to improve relations between the two countries.

He, however, did not name the publications.

"Enough is enough. Let us put an end to this emotionalism. Let us all be more responsible in what we say or write. Let us try to control the ugly

atmosphere, rather than contribute to it. Our relationship is too important not to do so."

Malott, however, made it a point to speak about US contributions in Malaysia.

"Let us remember the facts - that the US buys more Malaysian products than any country in the world, that we have invested more here in manufacturing, energy and services than any other country, that we have transferred more technology and educated more of Malaysia's children than any other nation."

When asked if Dr Mahathir's clarification on his alleged statement about the Jews was conveyed by the embassy to the US Government and the Congressmen, Malott said they were aware of the clarification as it had been reported by Bernama in Washington.

"Almost anything that is said here is reported back in Washington because the US Government subscribes to Bernama.

"The clarification that the Prime Minister made was reported directly by Bernama to US Government officers. The embassy also sent reports of what the Prime Minister had to say, clarifying his remarks.

"Despite the clarification, some of them (Congressmen) were not satisfied," he said.

Asked whether it was necessary for the US Government to disassociate itself from the draft Congressional resolution, Malott said at the moment the resolution remained a draft as it had not been passed.

"The administration prefers to wait until it reaches a certain point where perhaps it might be serious. Then I expect the involvement of the administration."

On the threatening phone calls which he said were also aimed at him, Malott said he took the calls seriously and had informed US citizens here about it.

Asked if he was sure the callers were Malaysians, he said he was not, but the callers spoke in English with Malaysian accent.

"But still, it is difficult to be sure."

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