

11 OCT 1997

Mahathir-Australia

MAHATHIR DISAPPOINTED OVER AUSTRALIA'S ALLEGATION

KEMAMAN, Oct 11 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today that he is disappointed over an allegation that the Malaysian government rejected a bid by the Australian company Transfield Defence Systems for a RM5.6 billion defence contract to hit back at the Australian government.

Dr Mahathir said that there was never such an intention and he was saddened by the allegation.

"We feel sad by such an allegation. Does it mean that we have no right at all to make a choice...they always dredged up that (issue). The moment we reject it (the company's proposal), they say we are hitting...we did not hit back," he told reporters after opening the Terengganu Advanced Technical Institute (TATI) here.

He was commenting on news reports quoting Australian Deputy Prime Minister Tim Fischer as blaming former Prime Minister Paul Keating's rift with his Malaysian counterpart for the loss of the contract to build 27 patrol boats for the Royal Malaysian Navy.

Keating caused a major political row in 1993 by describing Dr Mahathir as recalcitrant for not attending the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) meeting in Seattle.

According to Dr Mahathir, he had not yet received any information on the contract which was reported to have been offered to a German consortium.

Four companies were shortlisted for the contract. They were Transfield, Danish Naval Group, Vosper Thornycraft and the German Naval Group, a consortium of four German companies.

The prime minister said that the question of revenge did not arise and such an allegation should not have been made.

"To say that we did not offer (the contract) to Australia to hit back is not very nice. Surely we are not expected to offer everything to Australia," he said.

Dr Mahathir said that Malaysia received proposals from various parties which were all capable and it was up to the government to make its choice.

"To say that the Australian (company) is better than the German (consortium)...I find it hard to accept. Maybe as good as the Germans but there may be other factors to lead us to select the German consortium, if indeed it is true," he said.

The New Generation Off-shore Patrol Vessel Project, considered the core of the Navy's fleet modernisation programme, calls for the construction of the patrol boats at the Naval Dockyard Sdn Bhd shipyard in Lumut over a 15-year period.

-- BERNAMA

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