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Mahathir-MAS

MAHAHATHIR TELLS OF CAMPAIGN TO DISCREDIT MAS

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 24 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said certain people are behind a campaign to discredit the Malaysia Airlines (MAS) and its management in the hope of taking over the national carrier.

He said he had heard rumours spread by certain people that MAS chairman Tan Sri Tajuddin Ramli purportedly wanted to sell the airlines because he could not longer manage it.

"I asked Tajuddin whether it was true and he said he had no intention of selling (MAS) but there might be people having interest in MAS organising a campaign to give the impression that he could no longer manager MAS and should thus sell it," he said, responding to questions from reporters after presenting Hari Raya assistance and breaking the fast with orphans at the Tabung Haji Headquarters, here this evening.

Dr Mahathir was asked on a recent newspaper report which said that the quality of MAS service had deteriorated due to the shortage of skilled manpower and pilots to cope with its expansion programme including new destinations.

However, on Jan 22 Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik said the government had full confidence in Tajuddin's ability to resolve whatever problems faced by MAS and in leading the company.

Dr Mahathir said the government had no intention of preventing any parties from criticising MAS if the quality of its service had really deteriorated.

However, he said there seemed to be a campaign by certain people to remove Tajuddin and not really directed at the shortcomings in the quality of the service of the company.

"At times, there seems to be a campaign to unseat Tajuddin Ramli.

"It's a normal thing. Quite common when we don't like someone we discredit him. When he resigns, we stop criticising him," he said when asked whether he believed the report on the quality of MAS service was a campaign to discredit MAS and Tajuddin.

Dr Mahathir said going overboard in criticising MAS could lead to it winding up because the poor image publicised would sure cause people to avoid using the airlines.

"If we want our own airline to be bankrupt, go ahead criticise. Other people will not board (our aircraft)," he said.

He cited as an example in Pulau Pinang last year where the media played up two cases of cholera, causing many tourists to cancel their visit to the country and MAS to suffer RM50 million in losses.

He said in other countries, the cholera cases were worse and occurring all the times but the media did not play them up.

"We did this to our own, naturally we lose," he said, adding that the same could happen to MAS.

The Prime Minister, who appeared to be all out defending MAS' reputation, said the company had never really made profits before its take-over by Tajuddin as the profits made then were derived from aircraft sales.

Since then, MAS had taken more daring steps to expand its service to more destinations including South Africa and Argentina as requested by the government, he said.

"I think it is more efficient now. Compared to in the past, MAS now

flies everywhere. Surely, you can't expect to make profit on the first day. The service must also be good on the first day," he said.

Dr Mahathir said MAS' rapid expansion had caused it to face manpower problem just like that experienced by other airlines undergoing similar phase, more so in a full employment situation like in Malaysia.

Asked whether the government had advised MAS to improve its service within a given time frame, he said: "MAS is a private company, not belonging to us (i.e. government) ... we can only give our advice and it's up to its management. We've no power to give a time frame"

On the investigation over an allegation of discrepancies in the awarding of a Telekom Malaysia contract to Swedish multinational Ericsson Telecommunications, Dr Mahathir said he had not received any report on the investigation and it could probably take some time.

"It's up to the people who investigate. If it's wrong, then it's wrong. If not, it's not," he said.

Earlier in his speech, he said individuals or organisations wanting to give donations should not take exception to the race or belief of the potential recipients.

He hoped Malaysians would continue with the tradition of ever willing to help the needy.

During the function, the Muslim Orphans Welfare Association of Kuala Lumpur Federal Territory presented RM84,000 to 600 orphans of all races with each receiving RM140.

The charitable body of wives of ministers and deputy ministers, Bakti and Federal Territory Baitulmal also provided financial assistance to the orphans in conjunction with the Hari Raya Puasa.

-- BERNAMA

AH ABG