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People free to express their views: PM

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DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday said the Government cannot stop the people from expressing their feelings when their country and leaders are being criticised by others.

The Prime Minister said Malaysians are free to express their views.

"When they criticise the Government, we don't stop them. We also cannot stop them when they criticise other people. That is what freedom of speech is all about," he told reporters after launching a six-day Japan's Oita Prefecture One Village One Product and Tourism Promotion in Kuala Lumpur.

Dr Mahathir was asked to comment on the plea by US Ambassador to Malaysia John R. Malott that Malaysians stop their American-bashing.

"It is difficult for us to ask someone to stop expressing their feelings ... We cannot switch on and switch off (their feelings)," he said.

Malott, at a press conference on Monday, admitted that the move by the 34 members of the US Congress to ask Dr Mahathir to apologise or quit over his alleged anti-Jewish remarks was "inappropriate". The envoy, however, also asked that both sides stop making statements that would further jeopardise bilateral ties.

"It is not so easy to switch off something that has been started like this," he said in reference to Malaysians' reaction to 34 members of US Congress' draft resolution asking Dr Mahathir to resign.

Dr Mahathir also said it was wrong to think that Malaysia blames the US for the financial and economic difficulties faced by the country.

"We are not blaming the Americans. That is not true. We did not say the haze was caused by the Americans. But the press reports about the haze have been very serious. But when the sky is clear, they never report.

"In fact, the report saying that there is haze in Malaysia was reported 15 times in a day. As a result of this, the hotels in the country reported many cancellation of bookings.

"So, I think if you want to report something bad about Malaysia, at least also report when things have improved," he added.

On suggestions that Malaysia has a lot to lose if relations with the US turns sour, Dr Mahathir said as far as the Government is concerned, there is nothing wrong with Malaysia-US ties.

But in a relationship that turns bad, everybody loses, he said. "Of course we have a lot to lose, but everybody will lose. We don't want to sever ties with the US (but) this is not our 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 the people feel very unhappy and angry about all these."

Asked on the move by members of the US Congress to refuse the Prime Minister's clarification on the alleged anti-Jewish remarks, Dr Mahathir said:

"As much as they (US Congressmen) refuse, our people also refuse to accept an order by the Government to stop expressing their feelings.

"It not easy to stop people. They have their right to say something and the Congressmen also have the right to say something," he said.

Asked on the Barisan Nasional (BN) supreme council meeting in the morning, Dr Mahathir said he was not at the meeting because it was organised by the members themselves.

"This was a meeting organised for all of them (BN supreme council members) and it is not proper for me to be there. But then again, that is

the feelings that they have which they think they need to express," he added.

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