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PM: Accuracy of news reports important

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says the Press will be doing a disservice to readers if it abuses and corrupts its power in the name of press freedom.

He said accuracy in reporting is important because press reports could influence decision-makers and determine if an investor would invest in a country.

Readers pay the press "good money" and support their existence in order to obtain accurate reports and information that will assist them, for example, in making business decisions, Dr Mahathir said.

"Newspapers and the media often condemn governments for misuse of power and for abuse of power or corruption, but is it not corruption and an abuse of power to do something you know very well is wrong simply because you, the media, have power?"

He made these points when launching the Nihon Keizai Shimbun Inc (Nikkei) of Japan's news bureau in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

The bureau is Nikkei's 12th outside Tokyo.

In a country that practises democracy, the Prime Minister said the Malaysian Government also provides for press freedom.

"I like to point out that those who say the Government controls the Press in Malaysia actually never follow the vernacular press reports, which have nothing good to say about the Government.

"That is normal ... in every country, there are newspapers that follow one party.

"The same situation happens in Malaysia," he added.

To say the English language newspapers support the Government, Dr Mahathir said, is inaccurate as there are other newspapers that do not support the Government.

"For example, negative reports about me in papers that are controlled by the opposition parties, assumptions of me that could be sued for libel. (But) I won't (sue) because I believe in press freedom," he added.

In Malaysia, Dr Mahathir said, although the media are being given press freedom they also have to uphold their responsibility of the national interest.

"If you start stirring up racial sentiments through sensational reporting, you are going to damage the country's economy and the interest of the majority of people who do not want to see violence in the country.

"The Government has a duty and so does the Press, to ensure peace in the country. You can protest but you cannot disrupt peace and harmony in the country," he added.

He said although the country practises democracy, there are still limits, including to press freedom. "Our form of democracy is suitable for Malaysia. We do not ask others to follow and we need no advice from others. They may give advice but we may not listen."

Dr Mahathir said there is nothing to gain by contentious reporting and by passing remarks which are not supported by facts.

"Yes, we do make mistakes in Malaysia ... we sometimes do wrong things here but they must be reported in the proper perspective. This is not only for our own good, it is also for the good of those who deal with (the country) as they need to have the right kind of information," he added.

Therefore, Dr Mahathir said, accurate reporting is vital, including for investors who want to make business decisions.

"Investors need to have information before they can invest and most important, the information must be accurate. Businessmen cannot make decisions unless they know the subject.

"Thus, they need accurate reports ... not report on what you like to see happens but report on what happened," he added.

Dr Mahathir said the fact that there are many Japanese investors in Malaysia today is probably because they do not read negative reports about Malaysia that come from foreign wire news agencies, which he described as "always playing up negative and sensational reports".

"If they read those reports, they probably would not come to Malaysia because the reports are very negative," he said, adding Malaysia often been reported as a country which is about to break up in racial violence.

Dr Mahathir said there is ethnic violence in Europe and America but in Malaysia, "it occurred once in 1969 but we have been able to stop it."

"The results that we have achieved have never been reported before and yet Malaysia today is one country where different ethnic groups, cultures and religions have managed to live and work together to build and develop the country," he added.

He described Nikkei's move to open a bureau office in Kuala Lumpur as timely, to disseminate factual and accurate information on Malaysia to the Japanese, including those working outside Japan.

"I do hope with the starting of the Nikkei bureau here, they are able to report accurately and more in-depth, as well as understand what is happening in Malaysia.

"This is also vital, considering the fact that Japan is one of Malaysia's largest trading partners and investors.

"Roughly, 25 per cent of Malaysia's foreign investments come from Japan, and for the same reason, trade with Japan is very big and has greater impact on the development of Malaysia.

"Thus, there is still a need to provide accurate information to Japanese investors to encourage them to come to invest in Malaysia, especially in major projects such as the Multimedia Super Corridor," he added.

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