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PM: Attempt to topple MAS (HL)

Ashraf Abdullah; Hayati Hayatudin

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said tonight there appears to be a campaign to discredit the management of Malaysia Airlines and its chairman Tan Sri Tajudin Ramli by those hoping to take over the national carrier.

Dr Mahathir also refuted rumours that Tajudin had wanted to sell the airline as he could no longer manage it. The Prime Minister described such rumours as "untrue".

Dr Mahathir was responding to questions from reporters after presenting Hari Raya gifts to orphans at the Tabung Haji headquarters this evening after breaking fast with them. It was organised by the Federal Territory Orphans Welfare Association.

A Bernama reporter had asked Dr Mahathir whether the Cabinet had at its Wednesday meeting discussed the alleged decline in MAS' services.

The reporter also asked the Prime Minister to comment on a recent newspaper report which alleged that the drop in the quality of the airline's service was due to the shortage of skilled manpower and pilots to cope with its expansion programme, which included new destinations.

Asked whether the criticisms against MAS should be stopped, Dr Mahathir said: "If we want to bring down (lingkup) our own airline, then the criticisms should continue. Others too won't fly it.

"It's like previous years...we had a couple of cholera cases, and we made such a hue and cry about it that people feared coming here...MAS lost RM50 million then.

"In other places, where cholera exists throughout the year, there's no mention about it in the newspapers. When we do these things to ourselves, then we will lose.

"If there really are things which should be criticised, then go ahead. But if you initiate a campaign to bring down MAS, to ensure that its management fails, then we will have an airline that fails."

The Prime Minister was also asked whether he viewed the criticisms as an attempt to bring down MAS. He said that it looked as though there was some sort of a campaign to remove and undermine Tajudin.

Asked whether it was true that Tajudin had wanted to sell MAS, Dr Mahathir said: "Those are just rumours...I asked Tajudin whether it was true and he said he had no intention of selling (MAS).

"However, those interested in the airline may have started a campaign to give the impression that he could no longer manage MAS and should therefore sell it off.

"That's quite normal...it happens all the time. When we dislike a person, we'll continue criticising the person. When the person resigns, then we'll stop criticising him."

Asked to comment on why MAS fares were higher than that of Singapore Airlines, Dr Mahathir said that air travellers could choose which airline they wanted to fly with.

He said: "If MAS fares are higher, then fly with SIA...it's all right, especially if we want to make our airline suffer and become bankrupt."

Asked whether he was happy with the services provided by MAS, Dr Mahathir said:

"MAS is more efficient now. It is flying to many places in the world. If it flies everywhere, we cannot expect returns on the first day itself. Because of its expansion to service more routes, as requested by the

Government, it's being stretched a bit.

"It is more efficient now than before. Previously, it never made profits. It only managed to make money when it sold its aircraft."

Dr Mahathir said the shortage of manpower faced by MAS was partly because of insufficient labour.

The Prime Minister's comments came after Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik had on Wednesday expressed the government's full confidence in Tajudin's ability to resolve whatever problems faced by MAS and in leading the company.

On Monday, Tajuddin said MAS had taken steps to address some of its immediate problems and long-term challenges. He said the airline had identified key areas where immediate action could be taken to improve services.

Tajudin said the management and employees of MAS were aware of the issues raised recently and are just as concerned.

Tajudin was referring to a Berita Harian special report on Saturday which said that the quality of the national carrier's service had dropped because of a shortage of staff, including pilots.

He said MAS reviewed its manpower requirements based on its planned operations. He added that MAS was fully aware of the need for more pilots as it increased its fleet and flew to more destinations in line with national aspirations and its expansion plans.

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