

Don't criticise each other

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Dr M: Asean leaders should solve problems one-to-one

By STEPHEN THEN

BANDAR SERI HEGAWAN: Asean leaders, ministers, and others in position of power should exercise restraint in their criticism of each other to safeguard the integrity and solidarity of the grouping and to prevent it from breaking up, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday.

Should any of them feel the need to criticise their counterparts in other member countries, they should do so on a one-to-one basis instead of doing it openly for everybody to see, he said.

"I am attracted to the statement by the Prime Minister of Thailand (Chuan Leekpai) who said that if there is anything to be criticised, then it should be done one-to-one.

"I agree with his views," he told a press conference here after a meeting with sultan Hassan Bolkiah at the palace.

Dr Mahathir, who was on a two-day official visit to Brunei, said that such restraint should not only cover Asean leaders but also ministers and all those holding responsible positions in the governments of the respective

countries.

"They should not talk too much. One sure way of overcoming hiccups (in relationships) is not to talk. That is why I am very reluctant to talk," he said when asked to comment on the current strains affecting a few Asean nations over their criticisms of Malaysia on the issue of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia and a few other Asean countries did not agree that member nations should be commenting on the internal affairs of each other's country.

"If we start doing that, then it will create a very bad image. We all have a lot of things to criticise about each other," he quipped.

He said Asean, as a whole, had all along disagreed to allow member countries to criticise each other openly but some Asean countries had already done so.

Asked if there was any foreign element involved or those out to destabilise Asean unity, Dr Mahathir said he was not aware of any such plots as yet.

"But the way things are

being done now, it would seem that there are some who would like to see Asean being broken up.

"Asean as a grouping is still intact. The problems between some Asean countries can be described as hiccups. We will need to work on (overcoming) that," he said.

Asked if Asean will be able to stand united during the coming Apec meeting, he said there will be consensus in certain issues such as on the financial issues affecting the world.

"I am not sure about other issues," he said.

Dr Mahathir said he and the Sultan of Brunei yesterday also discussed the current situation in Cambodia and expressed hopes that the Cambodians would have a government soon.

Both Brunei and Malaysia agreed that Cambodia should be admitted into Asean as soon as possible, he said.

Dr Mahathir, his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, accompanied by Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, are in Brunei for a meeting with the sultan to discuss bilateral issues.

Dr Mahathir also said Malaysia and Brunei would look into the possibility of creating a special card for cross-border travel by land between Sarawak and the sultanate instead of using the passport.

He said the special card, if implemented, would facilitate travel for people of the two countries who commuted on a very regular basis into each other's country.

Dr Mahathir said the special card would reduce the burden now faced by those who had to have their passports stamped frequently when crossing

the border checkpoints.

"Both countries are happy with the status of our current relationship but there are still several matters which need to be discussed further and resolved, for example the issue of travel between Brunei and Sarawak," he said.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia and Thailand had similar arrangements on the use of the special cards for those living near the common border.

Malaysia also wants to encourage more Bruneians to study in Malaysia and for businessmen in the sultanate to increase investments in Malaysia.

"Brunei has expressed interest in several companies in Malaysia, for example those in the property and hotel sectors," he said, adding that there were still plenty of opportunities for investments by Bruneians.

-Earlier in the day, Dr Mahathir received about RM40,000 from Malaysians living and working in Brunei as contributions to the Dana Khas Nasional to help in the country's economic recovery.

He received the contributions at Rumah Malaysia, witnessed by about 100 dignitaries and guests.