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Demonstrations affecting the innocent, says PM

Rashid Yusof

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has reiterated his advice that the spate of demonstrations be stopped, saying that innocent people, especially the poor have been unfairly punished.

He said petty traders, taxi drivers and others had had their earnings affected whenever there were demonstrations.

"What have they done to deserve this? They are just trying to earn a living," the Prime Minister said today at a Press conference to announce the renaming of the Energy, Telecommunications and Posts Ministry to Energy, Communications and Multimedia Ministry.

Citing an example, Dr Mahathir said if there was a demonstration on Saturday, the weekly "pasar malam" along Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman here would be affected.

He said if the people wanted to change the Government, they could do so through the ballot box which provided for an orderly process.

Dr Mahathir said those who spoke of rule of law, could not at the same time reject the current laws when they were formulated in Parliament.

On suggestions that special areas be designated for people to hold gatherings, the Prime Minister said: "They may not like this. It may not be effective."

He said although peaceful gatherings were planned, when demonstrators did not get what they wanted, the demonstrations would escalate and become violent.

Asked whether foreigners had a hand in the demonstrations and illegal assemblies, Dr Mahathir, said: "There is foreign encouragement, judging from the publicity they receive. As for foreign involvement, I dare not say."

On whether the demonstration was serious, he said: "As it is, we see that it is not serious. I am sure if I say it is not serious, they will try to make it serious. If I say it is confined to Kuala Lumpur, they will try to hold it elsewhere too."

To another question on freedom of expression, the Prime Minister said by right he was the one who should be complaining. He said statements made by him and the Ministers were not aired by CNBC, CNN and the BBC.

Dr Mahathir said he had nothing against them giving coverage to those supporting former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. "But give the same opportunity for me to reply," he said.

To another question, he said, he had always worked under pressure. "I will say what I think is right," he added.

Dr Mahathir said he knew that he was certainly not the darling of the international community, because "if they do something wrong, I am going to say that it is wrong."

He said only those who praised them would become the darling.

On the involvement of civil servants in the demonstrations and illegal assemblies, Dr Mahathir said about 100 people were involved and they should not blame the Government if action was taken against them.

He said as civil servants, they should know civil service procedures and the actions that could be taken against them for breaching the General Orders and the country's laws.

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