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APEC-NEWS-MAHATHIR LEAD

DR MAHATHIR ENLIGHTENS APEC LEADERS ON POLITICAL SITUATION

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 16 (Beranma) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today he explained the actual political situation in the country to several Apec leaders, including his Australian counterpart, who are here for the Apec summit beginning tomorrow.

"Some asked about the case of conflict in the country, and we explained," the Prime Minister told a news conference after holding bilateral talks with several Apec leaders.

Hours earlier, Philippine Foreign Minister Domingo Siazon had said the Philippines admitted that the trial of former deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was conducted with much transparency.

Siazon told reporters this when briefing them on the bilateral talks between Dr Mahathir and Philippine President Joseph Estrada.

Dr Mahathir said he was happy that Manila could see the actual political situation in the country.

The Philippines and Australia were among several countries that had expressed their concerns on the "treatment" of Anwar, who has been charged with 10 counts of corrupt practice and sexual misconduct. He has denied all the charges.

"We are happy that they could see the actual situation," Dr Mahathir said.

To a question, Dr Mahathir said only Australian Prime Minister John Howard raised the Anwar issue.

Besides Howard and Estrada, Dr Mahathir also held bilateral talks with South Korean President Kim Dae Jung, Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, Chinese Taipei Representative Dr Chiang Pin Kung, Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai, Peru President Alberto Fujimori and Brunei's Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah.

Asked whether the leaders had changed their stand on the Anwar issue after listening to his explanation, Dr Mahathir said: "That we do not know. They did not vote, but only listened."

The Prime Minister said many had viewed Anwar's case as "a political action of the government but it is actually an ordinary trial".

Dr Mahathir said he had also told the Australian leader that Anwar's case was like any other trial.

"Like they say, everyone is equal before the law, so they have no right to say that for this person (Anwar), the law must be different. It cannot be.

"We are all equal before the law and the law must be applied equally to all of us, doesn't matter who we are," he said.

Earlier, when speaking to reporters after meeting Dr Mahathir, Howard had said he would continue to make efforts to maintain good relations with Malaysia.

Howard said he had conveyed Australia's view on the Anwar issue to Dr Mahathir.

Asked whether he took offence to the action of three Apec ministers in meeting Anwar's wife Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Ismail, Dr Mahathir said: "It is not a question of being slighted, but according to our customs here we will not interfere in the affairs of other countries."

"But if other people feel they want to interfere, that is their right, we do not question," he said.

Dr Mahathir also said that "at the moment, they (the Apec leaders) are

still focusing on the (Apec) agenda."
-- BERNAMA
TM YBY