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PM: Asean intact despite hiccups (HL)

Ashraf Abdullah in Bandar Seri Begawan  
PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday bilateral problems among Asean countries were mere "hiccups", adding that the association was intact.

But he said that there might be external elements bent on destroying the regional grouping.

"I don't know whether they (the foreigners) have plans, but certainly the way they are going about doing things seems to indicate that they would like to see Asean break up," Dr Mahathir added.

As a grouping, he said that Asean was intact and given time and effort by all parties, the current "hiccups" could be overcome.

He said the problems could be solved if leaders and those holding high posts in government spoke less of each other in the media.

Dr Mahathir, who is on a two-day working visit to Brunei, was speaking to reporters at the Darut Takwa guest house after an audience with the Sultan of Brunei Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah at the Istana Nurul Iman.

His delegation includes his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali and Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Several Asean members have had problems with each other in recent years. The relations between Malaysia and Singapore have been sour over several issues ranging from the Water Supply Agreement to the encroachment of Malaysian airspace by the Republic of Singapore Air Force.

Singapore and Indonesia are also having diplomatic problems over tight conditions attached by Singapore in providing financial assistance. President B.J. Habibie had said that he did not consider Singapore a friend.

Habibie and Philippine President Joseph Estrada ignored Asean's policy of non-interference when they criticised Malaysia over the arrest and detention of sacked Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Asked to comment on a proposal that the policy of non-interference be abolished, Dr Mahathir said:

"Malaysia did not agree. I think a number of Asean countries also did not agree that we should comment on the internal affairs of an Asean member. If we start doing that, there will be bad relations because we have a lot of things to criticise each other."

Dr Mahathir said Asean had not decided to abolish the policy of non-interference, the very basis of which the grouping was founded.

As such, the policy should be respected.

"I agree with the Thai Prime Minister (Chuan Leekpai) that if a member country wants to criticise another, it should be done through bilateral consultation."

Dr Mahathir also said he and Sultan Hassanal hoped that a government would be formed in Cambodia soon and that it should be admitted into Asean as soon as possible.

He added that Asean was expected to have a common stand on certain issues including the need to regulate the international financial system in the forthcoming Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum meeting in Kuala Lumpur next month.

\* BRUNEI MAY INCREASE INVESTMENTS: P2

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