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Mahathir-Interview

I HAVE LOST FREE SPEECH, SAYS MAHATHIR

By: Neville D'Cruz

MELBOURNE, Jan 29 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad believes he has "effectively lost the right of free speech" following reaction to his criticism of western nations over the currency problems in the region.

In an interview in Kuala Lumpur with Greg Sheridan, "The Australian" newspaper's foreign editor published today, Mahathir said: "It's been said I've now toned down criticisms. That is basically out of fear. It is no longer safe to speak our and give your views.

"If you say the wrong thing, you will be brutally punished by having our currency devalued again so it is very difficult for me to speak now.

"We lack the freedom of speech now. It has been pointed out that there is very close relation to opinions expressed or deeds done with the devaluation of currencies.

"The currency is devalued, jobs are lost, people suffer. It's a very heavy punishment on the whole nation.

"No leader, I think would want to say things which allow punishment not on him personally but on his people."

The newspaper report said Mahathir believed Malaysia had survived the currency crisis better than most nations in the region, pointing out it had not needed to restore to an International Monetary Fund (IMF) rescue package.

Mahathir, who is chairman of of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (Apec) for 1998, told Sheridan that the Apec Forum was unlikely to achieve anything of substance in addressing Asia's economic slowdown.

He said Apec had the potential to achieve something because the US was a member and the Americans had the power to do many things. But he held out little hope of Washington doing much to help.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim told Sheridan in interview published yesterday (Wednesday) that the Asian regional currency turmoil would lead to a dramatic reduction in crony capitalism.

He said the region would emerge from the crisis "more confident, more mature and liberal and democratic".

"The great lesson we have lerned, which is actually a major transformation and a revolution by itself, is that it has called for greater transparency, greater accountability, and for greater democracy," Anwar is quoted as saying.

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