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Mahathir-Anwar

I HOPE POLICE WON'T ARREST ANWAR'S WIFE, SAYS PM

By: Azman Ujang

TOKYO, Oct 20 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today he personally hopes that the police will not arrest the wife of ousted Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim who appears to be directly supporting street demonstrations in support of her jailed husband.

Dr Mahathir said he was sorry for Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail who seemed to force the police to arrest her.

"She did the right thing to support her husband but I hope the police won't arrest her," he said of last weekend's appearance by Dr Azizah in support of a pro-Anwar demonstration in Kuala Lumpur.

"But what the police will or will not do is their own business," said the Prime Minister in reply to questions from a top Japanese business leader at a seminar here.

Dr Mahathir said Anwar had a lot of support especially among young people whom he had "cultivated" to the extent that they had become fanatical supporters.

In interviews with various Japanese media during his visit here, the Prime Minister has been repeatedly asked why he fired Anwar last month and Anwar's appearance with a black eye following his arrest under the Internal Security Act (ISA) following anti-government riots by his supporters.

But Dr Mahathir said pro-Anwar demonstrations aimed at bringing down the government would not succeed because the vast majority of Malaysians would not support "street mobs" similar to those that toppled Indonesian President Suharto in May.

He said Anwar had a lot of supporters especially among young people to the extent that they had now become fanatical supporters who protested over how Anwar had been treated following his arrest.

"Anwar is a great and very convincing orator and someone who appears to be very religious and so he has fanatical supporters behind him but the situation in Malaysia is not as bad as what you see on CNN, CNBC or BBC," he said.

Hatakeyama, a former Vice Minister of International Trade and Industry, has asked Dr Mahathir why so many people had come out in support of Anwar since he was sacked.

The Prime Minister said the dismissal of Anwar was different from similar actions he took against a number of other ministers previously only because Anwar did not accept it and instead took to the streets with his supporters to bring down the government.

Anwar, who has pleaded innocent to 10 charges of sexual misconduct and corruption, is under remand in jail pending his trial scheduled to begin from Nov 2.

Asked why the Malaysian government seemed to have found Anwar guilty of the charges he faces even before his trial had begun, Dr Mahathir said the government did no such thing.

"I have only removed him from the government and that is my right as Prime Minister. But the foreign media has decided the government is bad. You are doing the conviction," he told a packed news conference later at the Japan National Press Club before leaving home after a five-day visit.

On the move by Indonesian President B.J. Habibie and Philippine President Joseph Estrada to link their attendance at next month's summit in Kuala Lumpur of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) forum with

government treatment for Anwar, he said both presidents had every right to express their own opinions on the matters but not to interfere in Malaysia's internal affairs.

"It's for them to decide whether they will attend. I myself did not attend the Apec summit in Seattle (in 1993). But people should also look at themselves whether they are qualified to criticise us," added the Prime Minister.

Reports from Manila said Estrada would attend the summit despite his vocal criticism of the treatment for Anwar and welcomed an offer made by Dr Mahathir during his visit here to allow him to visit Anwar in prison.

"The president will definitely attend Apec and if the occasion arises and there are no legal obstacles, the president is interested in seeing Mr Anwar," his spokesman was quoted as saying yesterday.

But Hatakeyama, the Jetro chairman, told the seminar earlier that he visited Indonesia recently and the economic situation in the country had worsened coupled with continuing political instability.

According to him, the most worrying was the spectre of social unrest in Indonesia because the price of rice had gone up by four times that before the fall of President Suharto

He said he had been told that the rising price of rice was due to the rice trade in Indonesia being in the hands of the Chinese Indonesians but since many of them had fled the country following riots in May, the rice trade had been disrupted.

"I have been told that it would take 15 years for the Indonesian economy to recover," said Hatakeyama, adding that the country was without political stability.

As he put it: "Without political stability there will be no economic stability and without economic stability, there is no political stability in Indonesia.

"I have been told that there are going to be a new round of street demonstration and that President Habibie will be out of office if there are mass demonstrations," said Hatakeyama, whose views are considered bold by Japanese standard.

At his pre-departure news conference later, Dr Mahathir also said he welcomed the opportunity to speak to such a large gathering of the international media and appealed to them to give Malaysia "fair reporting".

"Malaysia has been receiving very bad press for the last one year. We don't seem to be doing anything right to you, whether in our economic or domestic policies.

"I'm only asking you to give us the same treatment as you give to those who are against us. After all press freedom also means being fair and the press should be fair to us," he said.

The Prime Minister said if negative reporting on Malaysia was to be believed, then terrible things would be happening in the country but the fact was that Malaysia was doing much better than its neighbours who have gone to the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

He also said the financial problems of Southeast Asia and the Pacific region would be discussed thoroughly at the Apec Summit to find some kind of an understanding on how to handle the crisis.

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