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LEAD Mahathir-ISA

ILLEGAL RALLIES CAN CAUSE RIOTS, SAYS PM

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 24 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today public rallies organised by Anwar's supporters were banned to prevent racial riots.

"If we're responsible people we have to stop them, if we allow the rallies they may develop into looting, rape and the like," the prime minister said.

He said this when asked whether the illegal rallies organised by the former deputy prime minister's supporters could lead to racial riots.

Asked why such rallies were only banned now, he said there had always been a ban on public rallies in Malaysia, not only now.

When Anwar was doing it, he was breaking the law, he said.

The police were quite lenient when they allowed Anwar to hold rallies, he added.

Dr Mahathir was speaking to reporters after chairing the National Information Technology Council meeting at the Prime Minister's Department, here.

Anwar had organised large-scale public rallies nationwide after he lost his government and political posts. The rallies were held at his house, mosques and open areas like Merdeka Square to gain public sympathy.

Tomorrow, his supporters are said to be planning to hold another rally at Masjid Negara.

Dr Mahathir said Anwar's supporters had desecrated mosques and were sacrilegious to Islam and tried to incite the people to revolt with the aim of creating riots like those seen recently in Jakarta.

"They reckon that if this is achieved the government is toppled and as such, no trial can be held," he added.

"We cannot do anything, if we are rough, the CNBC (foreign television station) will come and show the pictures 15 times a day," he said, sarcastically referring to CNBC, which had sent its representative to the news conference, and other foreign media which had constantly aired pictures of Anwar's supporters demonstrating.

Dr Mahathir said Anwar was afraid of being tried in court for his alleged offences because then everything would come to light.

"So his supporters will do what they can to block an open trial. Anwar wants to be tried by his supporters, he does not want to be tried in court because from the beginning he has said that there is a pact between the court, police, prosecutor and I and that it is all a conspiracy," he said.

On the arrests of several people, including Anwar, under the Internal Security Act (ISA), the prime minister said he believed that the police had good reasons to arrest them.

He said such arrests were usually done for the purpose of questioning in connection with activities prejudicial to the nation's security.

He said the police acted according to their own assessment.

On Sunday, police arrested Anwar for instigating rioting by his supporters after leading a rally at Masjid Negara, here.

Several others linked to Anwar's "reformasi" (reform) movement, including Umno Youth Chief Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and four top leaders of the Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia (Abim), were also arrested under the ISA in the last three days.

Replying to a question on the concern of some people over Anwar's arrest, Dr Mahathir said this was the opinion of only a minority who liked

to speak of such things to the foreign media.

The CNBC reporter also asked Dr Mahathir on Anwar's recorded message made before his arrest and aired by CNBC today which, among other things, accused Dr Mahathir as being "hungry for power and money and basically spending the interest of the country for your family and cronies".

"Yes, of course, I am remaining in power because of my cronies and family, and you are free to air this every half an hour because you own the media and you can tell lies to the whole world and influence the whole world against us.

"We are powerless to do anything against you, so that is the rights of the media. What rights I have, of course, is of no interest of you, you can tell lies go on, I don't care. If you want to believe that, you are welcome to believe that," he said.

Dr Mahathir, when asked whether the government would take any action against the foreign media portraying negative and untrue reports, said: "This is freedom of speech, and freedom of speech includes freedom to tell lies, so we have to accept that."

The prime minister said the recent foreign media reports on Malaysia showed that the natives were not capable of running the country democratically and that Malaysia should resort to being a colony under a foreign rule.

-- BERNAMA

RAZ/ES JK