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`Media has yet to understand its role and responsibility'

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said tonight that despite the advancement of information and communication technology, the media had not fully understood its role, responsibility and power.

He said although they claimed freedom of the Press, they still resorted to biased reporting.

Dr Mahathir cited foreign Press reports that said 150,000 supporters of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim demonstrated at Dataran Merdeka recently when the actual figure was only about 5,000.

"If there were 150,000 people, they would have choked," he said, adding that Dataran Merdeka could not accommodate that many people.

With obvious reference made to the foreign Press, Dr Mahathir said their reports could not be accepted as the truth because they had the tendency to exaggerate.

Dr Mahathir was speaking at a dialogue called "Virtual Commonwealth" and themed "Governance in an Internetworked World: Towards a Global Society".

The dialogue had prominent local and international personalities speaking from six cities in three different time zones, discussing issues of governance in the Information Age.

The Virtual Commonwealth idea is based on the ideological notion of promoting the commonwealth, or shared prosperity, well-being and welfare.

It transcends traditional boundaries of nation states and focuses on the needs of the global community as represented by groups of interests and convictions.

Dr Mahathir said that due to the exaggeration by the foreign Press about Malaysia, he had begun to doubt the accuracy of their reports filed from elsewhere.

He said a Malaysian Member of Parliament who recently visited Russia said the foreign Press there had reported that there was a big demonstration against President Boris Yeltsin.

"In actual fact, they were celebrating the 800th anniversary of Moscow," he said, adding that the visuals aired were those of about 10 people who were showing placards condemning Yeltsin. Dr Mahathir said foreign media moguls could not accept the obvious as the truth.

"Malaysia is a multi-racial country. We don't fight each other. But certain media experts say although Malaysians appear to be harmonious, underneath there is a terrible strain.

"Obviously, the obvious is not taken as the truth," he said.

The Virtual Commonwealth mooted by Dr Mahathir at the Multimedia Asia '97 conference and exhibition last year, made its debut on the first day of MMA '98, at the Palace of the Golden Horses in Sri Kembangan.

The moderator for the dialogue was Malaysia's former permanent representative to the United Nations Tan Sri Razali Ismail.

Aside from Dr Mahathir, who represented Asia and developing nations, the other panellists speaking from Kuala Lumpur were:

* International Movement for a Just World president Dr Chandra Muzaffar, representing social, cultural and community interests;

* National IT Council permanent secretary Tengku Datuk Dr Mohd Azzman Shariffadeen, representing technology interests; and,

* Multimedia Development Corporation executive chairman Tan Sri Dr Othman Yeop Abdullah, representing the private sector.

The foreign panellists were:

* from Washington DC, World Bank Group vice-president (external and United Nations affairs) Mark Malloch Brown, representing global development interests;

* from Brussels, European Commission's Commissioner for Industrial Affairs, IT and Telecommunications Martin Bangemann, representing Europe;

* from Geneva, UN Conference on Trade and Development secretary-general Rubens Ricupero, representing South America and global trade interests; and,

* from Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government dean Dr Joseph S. Nye, representing academia and North America.

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