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`NGO gave false info to UK papers'

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - A Malaysian non-governmental organisation is responsible for feeding untruths to the foreign Press about the treatment of illegal immigrants in detention centres and their repatriation exercise, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The Prime Minister said the authorities had information that one of the NGOs in the country was the source.

He said the Government was studying the possibility of taking action against the NGO and the two British newspapers - The Observer and The Independent - for alleging that the Malaysian authorities had mass poisoned and killed Indonesian illegal immigrants at the centres.

"There is no truth in the allegations. We'll see what action we can take," he said when asked to comment on the reports.

Speaking after attending the Quality Day of the Implementation Co-ordination Unit in the Prime Minister's Department, he said the reports were a deliberate attempt to undermine the country.

Dr Mahathir had said on Wednesday that the reports published by the two newspapers were baseless and unfounded.

The Prime Minister said this ahead of a documentary on The Observer's report which will be broadcast over television by the British Broadcasting Corporation at seven tonight (London time).

Asked to comment on a foreign report that Malaysia and Indonesia had made a secret plan to send back 50,000 Indonesian immigrants, he said there was nothing secret about it.

"This is not a secret plan but an open plan," he said, adding that Indonesia had an obligation to take back the illegals as these people had no work here.

"In fact, they are sending their ships to pick them up ... there is nothing to hide ... Thailand is doing the same. Singapore canes them first but that does not attract comments.

"We don't even cane (them) ... I think we should cane ... because when we do things nicely we get accused of all sort of things."

Dr Mahathir said some huge media companies had accused Malaysia of suppressing and controlling the Press although their actions were worse.

"They tell lies ... they suppress news about us ... and yet they accuse us ... it's about time our Press told the truth about them."

Dr Mahathir said censorship, control of the Press and suppression of news were practised by huge international media companies which had monopolised the world Press.

These companies, he said, were getting bigger and bigger by acquiring more newspapers and satellite television stations.

"These people have got control of the media, we have no access to their media ... they are the ones with the Press control."

Dr Mahathir said they deliberately accused the Malaysian Government of controlling the Press to protect their own guilt of censorship.

He cited the continuous negative reports about Malaysia as an example of such suppression.

Dr Mahathir said any form of control in this country would be in the interest of the public, especially on news items that instigate racial riots.

"They (foreign media companies) are the ones controlling the Press. Try writing a letter to them - they won't publish it."

On whether the Government will allow higher foreign shareholding in other sectors besides telecommunications, Dr Mahathir said this would be studied.

"We have to study this on a case by case basis ... if we start opening everything ... eventually we will have no company of our own."

Dr Mahathir was asked this following the Government's decision to to allow foreigners to hold up to 61 per cent equity in local telecommunications firms.

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