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PM reiterates that there is no rift with Anwar

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today reiterated that there is no rift between him and his deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim but the foreign Press keep insisting that there is.

"There is no rift (with Anwar), every morning we sit down, he, Daim (Tun Daim Zainuddin, Economic Adviser to the Government) and I decide what we have to do together.

"But no matter how we do it, even if I were to kiss and hug him in public all the time, they will say there is a rift because that is what they want to see," he added.

He was responding to a question from CNBC journalist Lynette Lithgow suggesting a rift between him and Anwar, who is also Finance Minister.

Dr Mahathir had earlier launched Asnita, Malaysia's first unit trust fund for women, at the Putra World Trade Centre.

On why his statements were perceived as being different from those of Anwar's, Dr Mahathir said: "Wrong, perhaps the way he puts it may sound different but the basics are the same."

On whether the Government practised cronyism and nepotism, Dr Mahathir said there was no such thing.

He said the Government, which subscribed to the Malaysia Incorporated concept, had a duty to help people and companies which contributed 28 per cent of their profits as Government revenue.

"Why shouldn't we help them, in whom we don't invest ... but when they make a profit, 28 per cent is for the Government. We help everybody," he said.

Dr Mahathir refuted claims that he had helped his son Mirzan, who owns Konsortium Perkapalan Bhd, in the acquisition of his (Mirzan's) shipping business and assets by Petronas, the national oil company.

"We help any business in trouble, this is a business decision. You should see whether it is favouritism ... just giving money away freely or was it a commercial deal.

"Please look carefully into what was being done. It is not because he is my son. It is a favourite gambit of the western Press to say that Asians are all corrupt people who just spend money on their children."

Dr Mahathir said he had many children and relatives who were poor and invited the journalists to see the kind of lives they were living.

"They shouldn't be living that way if I'm someone who spent Government money on my own relatives ... I don't do that," Dr Mahathir added.

On attacks by the British Press against the Government over the past two weeks, Dr Mahathir said the British Press had ill-will towards Malaysia and was out to frustrate the country in any way it could.

"We know that these people have ill-will towards us. They want to frustrate Malaysia in any way they can. This is part of the freedom of the Press...the freedom to influence adversely against other countries. This is the freedom of the Press as interpreted by them," he said.

Dr Mahathir was asked about the constant attacks on Malaysia by the British Press with the latest report by the Observer saying that foreign athletes who took part in the 1998 Commonwealth Games here would be exposed to the haze which was an equivalent of smoking 1,000 cigarettes a day.

He said to Malaysians, freedom must be accompanied with responsibility.

"But they (the British Press) make money out of other people's

misery...if there is an accident and people are dead, they go into the background of those things. They even pay criminals money in order to get their stories.

"For them the most important thing is to make money, it doesn't matter how it is done. Even if it is at the expense of poor people or the miseries of families and people involved in some misfortune."

Asked why the Government did not take any action against the British Press, Dr Mahathir said:

"It is not worthwhile because they have control over the media and anything we do will be reported in an adverse manner in order to make matters worse."

Last week, The Observer and The Independent also alleged that Malaysian authorities had mass-poisoned and killed illegal immigrants at detention centres.

Dr Mahathir had on Thursday described the allegations as baseless and unfounded, saying that the accusations were to protect their own wrongdoings which resulted in Indonesia becoming poorer and its people forced to flee.

On interest rates, Dr Mahathir said although Malaysia was trying to lower interest rates, external forces have kept interest rates high.

"With interest rates raised, the cost of doing business would increase and companies would suffer due to the inability to get funds which in the process would stifle business activity," he said.

He said as the Government had a 28 per cent share on company profits as corporate taxes, it would be depriving companies of getting their funds if the interest rates were raised.

Interbank rates have risen to around 11.05 per cent from 7 per cent before the currency attack last July.

This means banks have to lend to customers at even higher rates.

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