

22/07/1998

Press has a major role in reviving economy, says PM

Farush Khan

SEREMBAN, Tues. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today reminded the local media that they have a major role to play in reviving the country's economy.

However, the Prime Minister said, it was unfortunate that sometimes the media chose to negatively report issues excessively, which could become a counter-productive action.

Dr Mahathir cited recent reports on Indah Water Konsortium and the Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang which had negative elements.

He also spoke on the lack of coverage given by the local media to projects which could be considered "charitable" in nature.

Dr Mahathir was speaking at a Press conference after a closed-door meeting with Negeri Sembilan Umno leaders.

He had been asked his expectations of the media following changes in the top positions of several newspapers.

More than 400 divisional leaders attended the the meeting. Dr Mahathir arrived this morning for a one-day working visit here.

Responding to the question, Dr Mahathir said nobody, including himself, could hold their positions indefinitely.

"Sometimes we have to go, but I hope when I go, people will not make strange interpretations," he added.

Elaborating on the local media coverage, Dr Mahathir recalled that when IWK was given a RM500 million soft loan from the Government, the media had asked whether or not the move was a bailout.

The local media, he added, had echoed the sentiments of certain sections of the foreign media.

He also spoke of the lack of coverage on the facilities provided by Petronas at the Kuala Lumpur City Centre for the people.

He said Petronas had spent RM100 million providing a mall, swimming pool and a park at the KLCC for the people. He said when he visited the KLCC on Sunday, he saw hundreds of people enjoying the facilities free of charge.

Dr Mahathir said: "The company (Petronas) has done it on its own initiative. No one directed (the company) to do it. Did anybody ever say that this was a very charitable act on the part of Petronas?"

On the other hand, reports about the problems encountered by the Kuala Lumpur International Airport were highlighted, the Prime Minister said.

He added that it was lucky that the new airport in Hong Kong was also facing problems.

"Otherwise, the KLIA would continue to be seen as no good," he said.

In Washington, Zainul Ariffin reports that Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim described the recent resignations of newspaper editors as part of normal changes in the industry.

Nevertheless, he said, while the editors may change, the media must continue to be credible, truthful and responsible in doing its job.

"As the Prime Minister had said, these are on-going normal changes.

"What is more important is that the media must remain credible and objective and must continue to play its role in disseminating information and truth."

He was responding to questions from reporters on foreign media reports that the editors who resigned, believed to be aligned with him, were indeed "fired" and that their removal could be seen as a direct attack on him.

Over the last week, the Berita Harian group editor, Datuk A. Nazri Abdullah and the editor-in-chief of Utusan Melayu, Datuk Johan Jaaffar, resigned from their posts.

"(The media doing its job) is more critical than the (speculations)," he said yesterday.

He said this at the end of a two-day trip which included several meetings with officials from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

Anwar was also asked on the speculation that there were differences between him and Dr Mahathir in the handling of the economic problems.

He said he and the Prime Minister complemented each other in their roles, and that any differences in the ways employed to spur economic recovery were merely "perceived differences".

He said the differences were perceived as the Prime Minister was articulating the concerns of the business community and the many developing economies on the effect of liberalisation, and the failure of the international community to protect poorer countries.

"These are considerations I share. But you must be able to differentiate between the general political concerns and actual policy programmes to be implemented. Because of the different roles (between the two) you will see perceived differences."

He said the statements which he made were usually tied to the general policies coordinated by the Treasury, that Malaysia was expected to implement.

For example, on the issue of interest rates, Anwar said he shared Dr Mahathir's view that it should be low as a means to stimulate economic activities.

Anwar also denied suggestions that he was tailoring his pronouncements differently when he was abroad, expousing tough monetary policies, and yet speaking of the need for less stringent measures at home.

"Even to the local audience I said the same thing."

(END)