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Reports of 'mass poisoning' a cover-up bid: PM

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, denying foreign reports alleging "mass poisoning" of illegal Indonesian immigrants in detention camps, said they are an attempt at a cover-up by those responsible for impoverishing Indonesia.

"Why should we poison the illegal immigrants when we can send thousands of them home? The Indonesian Government itself accepts that they (illegal immigrants) have to be repatriated," he told reporters after a special meeting with Umno divisional leaders in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Dr Mahathir, who is also Home Minister, was asked to comment on the reports in two British newspapers, The Observer and The Independent, claiming that Malaysia had conducted "mass poisoning" of refugees and illegal immigrants to subdue them prior to their mass deportation last month.

A policeman and eight Indonesian detainees died in a riot which broke out at the Semenyih camp during the exercise.

"Why the need to kill people just because they are a problem?"

Dr Mahathir said the real poisoning is done by those who made Indonesia so much poorer, and caused 20 million of its people to lose their jobs.

"They are jobless not because of the Indonesian Government ... but because the depressed rupiah forced many companies to go bankrupt and banks to close down. They are caused by the same kind of people who wrote those reports," he said.

He also slammed human rights groups for applying pressure on Malaysia to open up its detention camps to inspection.

"The human rights groups won't be satisfied until we provide five-star hotel accommodation to the illegal immigrants.

"If they are willing to finance it, we are prepared to put them (the detainees) in the Shangri-La Hotel," the Prime Minister added.

Dr Mahathir also said the Government is trying to contain adverse foreign influence on the country's economy.

"We will try to reduce foreign influence ... we may not be able to eradicate it but at least we will limit the influence," he said.

Asked what he meant by negative influence, Dr Mahathir said he was referring to manipulative control over the ringgit and share prices as well as the power to impoverish or enrich a country.

On whether such a measure would run counter to the Government's efforts to attract foreign investment, he said unlike currency and stock market speculators, genuine investors, for example in the manufacturing and production sectors, do not place high priority on short-term capital gains.

"They (manufacturers) are not involved in politics but will certainly need political stability in the country," he added.

On the special meeting, Dr Mahathir said he took the opportunity to explain to the Umno divisional leaders about the present economic problems, the actions taken by the Government and the reasons for them.

"Hopefully, the Government's decisions will no longer be misconstrued."

At this point, Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim noted that all Umno leaders fully support Dr Mahathir's handling of the economic problems.

"From my observation during the special meeting, I think they are sincere in supporting the Umno president," he said.

On the reason for calling the special meeting, Dr Mahathir said it was actually supposed to be held much earlier, but due to certain problems it was postponed.

"We believe that it is important for Umno leaders, especially from the states, to know what the Federal Government is doing to address the situation.

"By doing so, relations between the state and Federal governments are also enhanced," he added.

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