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Rich are still unable to feel our sufferings, says PM

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday said the leaders of the developed nations were still unable to "feel" the hardship suffered by Asians from the region's economic turmoil though they admitted its global effect.

As a result, some of the solutions they offered to tackle the crisis, and their insistence that these economies should subscribe to their prescriptions, were unacceptable to the affected nations.

"We have appealed that our voices should be heard. They don't think that they should consult us," Dr Mahathir said during a dialogue session after he opened the Apec Business Summit at the Putra World Trade Centre in Kuala Lumpur.

Citing an example, he said Malaysia borrowed lots of yen from Japan in the past, but when the country revalued the yen, Malaysia was not consulted and "we have to pay two-and-a-half times more."

Earlier, one of the participants at the summit, Philippines Stock Exchange president and chief executive officer Jose Luis Yulo Jr, calling Dr Mahathir his "hero" for (initially) being the lone voice against currency traders, asked for the Prime Minister's comments on why it took world leaders so long to accept his assertion that currency trading must be regulated.

"I am trained as a doctor. People who are well cannot understand how sick people feel until it strikes them," Dr Mahathir said.

Now that the leaders realised currency depreciation would affect them after all, in terms of lower earnings and erosion of their investments, they had started looking at regulating currency trading.

"My worry is that they are looking at it (regulating currency trading) from their own angle.

"Their investment losses in Russia (due to the collapse of the Russian economy) were based on their computer theories of people but people do not always behave according to theories.

"When the Russians decided to delay payments of debt instalment, hedge funds like LTCM lost money and had to be bailed out.

"The leaders are not looking from our angle, we still don't see eye-to-eye. They want to minimise their loss risk while we want to get rid of our suffering," Dr Mahathir said.

Another participant, who introduced himself as a concerned citizen of the world, wanted Dr Mahathir's views on the destructive reporting of the economies of the world, including Malaysia, by certain members of the media including "CNN".

The Prime Minister said technological advancement should be used in a more responsible way.

"Why not show what is factual. Three quarters of the delegates who are here today believed that Malaysia is in a state of turmoil. There are riots everywhere and that the Government is shaky.

"The Prime Minister cannot even afford to have a cold," he said to the audience of 1,000-odd top business executives who laughed at the remark.

He added that: "As you can see, Malaysia is quiet and calm. We will do our best and be hospitable to our guests even if they do not want to talk to us."

Later at a Press conference, Dr Mahathir also explained the reasons why Malaysia introduced exchange rate controls and his limited expectations

from Apec on ways to regulate currency trading.

"What I hope to achieve is to impress on delegates the problems caused by currency traders and the need to govern their activities."

On what sort of ideas he had in mind, Dr Mahathir said they included requiring currency traders to register in countries they operate and not allowing hedge funds to borrow from banks amounts so much higher than their capital.

When it was pointed out that measures taken by Malaysia could be considered a shift backward advocating protectionism, he said:

"Common sense will tell you that when you find something is wrong, there is no harm to pull back and take another direction, which is still going forward. But to persist on doing something simply because you call them a step forward despite producing bad results, it is very bad."

On whether the scope of Apec should be widened to include social development and human rights issues, Dr Mahathir replied: "If we keep widening things, then we might end up becoming another United Nations. (Then) we will be able to talk and do nothing."

When asked to comment on claims of the country's "oppressive" police in view of the way Special Branch officers "turned over" or neutralised people in the corruption case involving sacked Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, he said:

"I have no worries about the police here but I do worry about politicians who tried to interfere with the police because of their position.

"The police regard themselves as subordinates to leaders of this country, but when we have those who tried to influence them to do wrong things, you put the force in a very difficult position."

Asked whether it was appropriate for two Canadian ministers, who were here attending Apec, to meet with Anwar's wife Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail yesterday, he said they could do so if they thought it was legitimate to interfere in other's people affairs.

On reports that Australian Prime Minister John Howard would convey his concerns on Anwar at a bilateral meeting with Dr Mahathir, he said he would also express concerns about people making decisions and forming opinions merely based on media reports.

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