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Mahathir-Suharto

SUHARTO ALWAYS STATES THAT HE IS PREPARED TO STEP DOWN, SAYS MAHATHIR

By: Azman Ujang

KHARTOUM, May 15 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today President Suharto has been saying for some time that he is prepared to step down if the people no longer want him to rule Indonesia where there is now worsening political unrest.

"He has been saying it for quite some time. But what he is upset about is that there are outsiders taking part (to unseat him)," Dr Mahathir told Bernama here late Thursday when he was asked to comment on the latest situation in Indonesia.

Dr Mahathir, who ends his three-day official visit to Sudan late Friday, said that he had a brief meeting with President Suharto in Cairo last Wednesday. The two leaders were in the Egyptian capital to attend the G-15 Summit.

The prime minister said that in the meeting, however, he had stated to President Suharto Malaysia's support for measures being taken for Indonesia's economic recovery.

"We support Indonesia's efforts for its economic recovery in accordance with the requirements of the IMF (International Monetary Fund)," he said.

He was also asked to comment on the widespread rioting by students who looted shops and set public property on fire.

Dr Mahathir said that such a situation in Indonesia now could easily spread if it happened anywhere including Malaysia.

Earlier, in a gathering of Malaysian students here, Dr Mahathir said that President Suharto was not the cause of the economic decline, the lowest in 30 years, experienced now.

He said that Indonesia had actually become a very advanced developing country under President Suharto, unlike before.

"During President Sukarno's rule previously, we in Malaysia always hear of how very poor Indonesians were...there were not enough food and there were some reported to have eaten rats," he said.

He said that Indonesia, under President Suharto, achieved so much progress and prosperity but what happened now was actually the result of the economic crisis, like in Malaysia, due to the depreciation of the Indonesian currency.

Dr Mahathir said that the Indonesian Rupiah was devalued by 400 per cent while the Malaysian Ringgit by 50 per cent due to the currency manipulation.

"Certainly there are attempts to topple President Suharto by outsiders. As for Malaysia, there are attempts to topple me by outsiders," he said.

Last week, Dr Mahathir told Malaysian students in Cairo that Malaysia had provided a bridging loan of US\$250 million to Indonesia to assist the republic in its economic recovery.

He said that Indonesia would make repayment on receiving the IMF economic recovery package soon.

Dr Mahathir told the Malaysian students here that the situation in Indonesia was devastating especially as so many companies including banks had been made bankrupt and some 20 million people have lost their jobs.

President Suharto had to shorten his official visit to Egypt after the G-15 Summit due to the situation in Indonesia which remained uncertain.

He told the Indonesian community at a gathering in Cairo that he was prepared to step down if the people no longer wanted him.

The Indonesia press covering his visit reported that President Suharto

had pledged that he would not defend his position through force.

-- BERNAMA

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