

27/10/1998

Use your power to do good, not harm, PM tells the media

THE mass media have become a powerful global institution - often more powerful than governments - and are consequently in a position to do as much harm as good, says Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

It is the role of the media to highlight injustice and work for a better world, but there are times they have yielded to the temptation to abuse their power, he said when opening the Commonwealth Press Union biennial conference in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

This power has been made even more apparent by the media's new-found global reach where the obstacles of distance and time have been removed by advances in technology.

Urging the media to rethink their role and use their power well, Dr Mahathir said he was not asking for only good things to be reported.

"I am asking that the media be fair, balanced and factual."

Take for example the coverage on Malaysia, "unflattering comments invariably precede any mention of the word Malaysia," he said.

"And every time Malaysia appears on the TV screen, for whatever reason, pictures of rioting and the famous black eye are shown," he said, in an apparent reference to sacked Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim who was brought to court last month with a bruised eye.

The impression given by these foreign TV news reports is that Malaysia is in a state of perpetual turmoil or it is a police state when police brutality is a daily or hourly occurrence.

"None of the positive things we have achieved have been reported. A multi-racial country that is stable and economically successful is not a subject of interest to the powerful international media.

"But a failure of any kind makes good copy," he said.

"If the media must report on all those agitating against the governments of developing countries, at least give the government side fair exposure as well," the Prime Minister said.

Similarly, with the kind of media treatment that US President Bill Clinton has received over the Monica Lewinsky case, "how can anyone sit in judgement over him without being biased, without preconception? How can the impeachment (proceedings) be fair and just?"

"The media accuse the Malaysian Government and those of other developing countries of controlling the press. But isn't the media doing the same?"

Later, during a question and answer session, Dr Mahathir said governments have just as much right to press freedom as anyone else.

To the press it is a freedom to report anything it likes, but to the Government press freedom is also the right to communicate with the masses.

"So when the press denies the right of the government to communicate with the people, the press is reserving that freedom for itself," he said.

He likened the situation to that of currency trading where speculators, through their closely guarded freedom, have caused some 20 million people to lose their jobs.

"In Malaysia, the press is free but it is also responsible.

"We, in this country, make no bones about the fact that we want a disciplined and orderly society... because we are competing with others and in order to compete, we cannot have anarchy," he said.

(END)