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Journalist-Release

CANADIAN JOURNALIST TO BE FREED ON MONDAY

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 4 (Bernama) -- Canadian journalist Murray Hiebert, whose jailing on Sept 11 for contempt of court made headlines throughout the world, will be released on Monday (Oct 11), a senior Prisons Department official said today.

Hiebert, 50, the Malaysian bureau chief of the Far Eastern Economic Review magazine, was sentenced to six weeks in prison but would serve only four weeks for good behaviour, its Head of Public Relations Jamil Razif Kassim told Bernama.

Malaysian prison rules permit one-third remission of sentence for good behaviour.

Jamil said Hiebert initially served his sentence at the Sungai Buloh Prison on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur but was transferred to the Seremban Prison in Negeri Sembilan about 64km from here 10 days later.

Asked what time Hiebert would be set free that day, he said: "Anytime from 8am to 4pm".

Jamil declined to say why Hiebert was transferred to the Seremban Prison.

Hiebert was convicted of contempt of court in September 1997 for a story he wrote for the Hong Kong-based magazine earlier that year.

The article, "See You in Court" discussed the growing number of defamation suits in Malaysia and in particular a case that involved the son of a prominent Malaysian judge.

Hiebert, from Steinbach, Manitoba, was jailed after he lost an appeal on his conviction.

His jailing attracted world attention because he became the first journalist in a half-century to be jailed for contempt in any Commonwealth nation.

International human rights organisations as well as US President Bill Clinton expressed concern over Hiebert's jailing but Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said their criticisms were an interference with the country's justice system.

Hiebert had written about the merits of a pending suit by Datin Chandra Sri Ram, wife of Court of Appeal Judge Datuk Gopal Sri Ram against the International School of Kuala Lumpur.

Hiebert's wife was a teacher at the school. She and her two children have since left Malaysia and are living in Washington, D.C.

A dozen Commonwealth lawyers visited Hiebert in the Sungai Buloh Prison six days after he was jailed while they were here to attend the Commonwealth Law Conference.

The lawyers came from Britain, New Zealand and Malaysia. They were accompanied by acting Canadian High Commissioner Otch van Finckenstein.

Meanwhile, the Federal Court here will hear Hiebert's application for leave to appeal against his conviction and sentence on Oct 18.

Hiebert was earlier sentenced to a three-month jail after he was found guilty in 1997 but the Court of Appeal reduced the jail term to six weeks.

He agreed to serve the sentence on the same day the Court of Appeal dismissed his application for the release of his passport, on Sept 11.

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