

23/06/1999

Dr M: There is need for policing of Press freedom

Sarban Singh

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Drawing examples from the movie Entrapment and recent Western media hype condemning Malaysia over the Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim-issue, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today said there is a need for some monitoring or policing of Press freedom and advertising.

The Prime Minister said in less developed countries like Malaysia, the Government still had to monitor and regulate.

"Freedom is a heady brew and for those newly introduced to it, freedom tends to go to the head.

"In a world that is deregulating everything, that rejects Government as the arbiter of society's conduct, it is paradoxical that regulations are still needed although they are designed and imposed by the people concerned themselves."

Dr Mahathir said this in his speech at the Worldwide Partners' 1999 annual world meeting here.

Worldwide Partners' is a consortium of advertising agencies comprising over 100 member agencies in more than 50 countries. It is the largest network of independently owned agencies in the world with approximately RM12.9 billion in annual billings.

The meeting, hosted by Integrated Strategic Communications Bullseye, is being held in Asia for the first time.

Also present were its chairman Mickey Gallivan and president Patricia Fiske.

Without naming the movie, Dr Mahathir said Malaysians were horrified to discover that the Kuala Lumpur twin towers, the tallest in the world, were pictured as rising from the slums in Malacca, located 150km away.

He said the twin towers were located in the middle of a modern city and was surrounded by 20ha of gardens.

"The distorted view of the twin towers will certainly make movie audiences in rich countries conclude that Malaysia is one of those developing countries which wasted public money, perhaps even foreign aid, on useless grandiose monuments.

"I really cannot understand why we need to distort and harm when we can be charitable without any additional cost to ourselves."

Dr Mahathir said the failure of the Western media to report the situation in Malaysia, especially now that things had returned to normal, had caused people to believe that the situation here was still unstable and dangerous.

"Understandably, many of you were sceptical, anxious, even fearful of coming here after hearing and reading about the allegedly deliberate beating up, trial and jailing of Malaysia's former Deputy Prime Minister last September and the ensuing protests which, like advertising, have become larger than life through repeated worldwide media hype."

Dr Mahathir said the Western media had made highly-publicised critical statements condemning Malaysia's governmental, judiciary and political processes due to the arrest, trial and the jailing of the former deputy prime minister.

"But then again, if I had been in your shoes, I may have been similarly concerned about being here."

Dr Mahathir said many potential foreign investors had also lost out on profitable investments in Malaysia due to the distorted and incorrect information they received.

He said since last September, the local bourse's index rose by almost 200 per cent.

"Literally, this means investors who came in early would have made huge capital gains but they (those who didn't) did not because of the incorrect information they had received through the media," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the suppliers of news and promises made in the course of advertising were no different from suppliers of goods and services. Based on what they are told or led to believe, consumers act.

"They buy or use what is supplied to them. If they find that what they buy or consume or act upon is not as described, then they have a right to seek compensation," he said, adding that material goods could be returned but many things could not be returned or compensated for.

Dr Mahathir said aircraft-producer Cessna ceased producing single-engined planes because any defect found 20 years after its usage could still result in the company being sued or blamed.

"But when news agencies sell their news reports to their clients, readers and viewers, shouldn't they be made equally responsible for the products they sell?."

"If their distorted and inaccurate news results in wrong decisions being made and losses incurred due to missed opportunities, shouldn't the news agencies, the media, be held responsible for their products, namely the news they broadcast to people who are their clients?" the Prime Minister asked.

Dr Mahathir said although Malaysians were not very litigious, they were learning fast.

"We hope the good judges will not be so carried away by the rights of litigants that they make awards which will eventually burden society with high costs.

"But whether they do or don't, it is the duty of everyone to be truthful about the goods and services they sell," he added.

"What I am talking about may not be relevant to the advertising industry. But adverse news reports have the same effect as advertising. That is the relevance," he said.

(END)