

17 JUL 1999

Mahathir-Indians

FUND ISSUE RAISED TO HIT OUT AT MIC- DR MAHATHIR

KUALA LUMPUR, July 17 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today certain groups have turned the government's decision to dissolve the South Indian Labour Fund into a political issue just to hit out at the MIC leadership.

"It is very political. It has nothing to do with the benefit of the fund itself," he said when asked if the Cabinet made a hasty decision to dissolve the 41-year-old fund.

Speaking to reporters after opening the 46th MCA general assembly here, Dr Mahathir, said "It appears that they are more interested in hitting out at the MIC. There is a little hatred against the MIC leadership."

"So these people are looking for issues so as to hit at the MIC and have made this into an issue," he said.

While assuring Indians that their future would be taken care of even without the fund, Dr Mahathir said a local Tamil daily had been flaring up the issue to create an emotional outburst within the Indian community.

Without naming the newspaper, Dr Mahathir said the newspaper only wanted to use the issue for its "political purposes".

Last Tuesday, the Dewan Rakyat approved the South Indian Labour Fund (Dissolution) Bill 1999 after a study by the government in 1993, which showed the board set up to manage the fund, was no longer carrying out its main functions as stipulated in the South Indian Labour Fund Act 1958.

Deputy Human Resources Minister Datuk Dr Affifuddin Omar who tabled the Bill, said all powers, rights, privileges, duties, monies, land, property assets, liabilities and obligations vested in the board would be divested to the government.

The board, with assets worth about RM5 million, was set up on Sept 1, 1958 by the British to meet the expenses of South Indians returning to India and to take care of their dependants in Malaysia by providing them with monthly financial aid.

The decision to dissolve the fund sparked an outburst among some Indian-based non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which had called on the government to delay the dissolution of the fund until after they were consulted.

Dr Mahathir said groups opposing the dissolution of the Fund were politically motivated.

He said the government would not expropriate the fund's assets.

"We will take care of the people who still get benefits from the fund," he added.

Affifuddin had earlier said a technical institute would be set up on a six-hectare site owned by the fund at Nibong Tebal, Penang while the old folks residing there were being taken care of the Welfare Services Department.

Dr Mahathir urged the Indian community not to turn the dissolution of the fund into an issue and raise sentiments.

"We are not South Indian anymore but Malaysians," Dr Mahathir said.

He said the Fund was set up by the British to help South Indian labourers facing problems.

"At that time, true enough, the Fund was important but now citizens of Indian descent are being well looked after by the present Government," he said.

"Then why should we retain something which was formulated by the

colonial powers,?" the Prime Minister said.

He said the government was always ready to hear and resolve problems faced by the Indian community in this country.

Dr Mahathir said the government would give due consideration to the requests of the Indian community.

"Whatever problem can be resolved. Just tell, what is the problem," Dr Mahathir reiterated firmly.

On the dispute between the MIC and the PPP, Dr Mahathir said, "It's no big deal. Not on the scale of the conflict between the DAP and Keadilan and between DAP and PAS."

Differences were bound to occur among component parties of the BN but these were minor.

The Prime Minister said that when the General Election was held BN component parties always closed ranks.

--BERNAMA

ES AAM