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Ibrahim-Sue

GOVT TO SUE SLANDERERS WHO DISCREDIT COUNTRY'S LEADERSHIP

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 3 (Bernama) -- The government warned today that legal action will be taken against those found to have slandered to discredit the country's leadership.

In issuing the warning, Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Ibrahim Ali said it was time the government acted firmly by suing the slanderers such as leaders and newspapers published by opposition parties which abused the freedom of speech to slander.

"We are scrutinising media reports and speeches of opposition politicians which have been widely circulated in the form of cassette tapes. The time has come for us to act to hold them responsible for allegations which smacked of slander," he told BERNAMA.

Ibrahim said he himself had bought cassette tapes containing speeches made in ceramahs held by opposition parties to study whether the allegations made against the country's leadership had specific slanderous elements.

He, however, made it clear that the government had no intention to curb the existing freedom of speech but merely wanted to ensure that the freedom had "a price and value."

"We hope the people will not misunderstand. The government merely wants to uphold the rule of law as nobody is above the law including the government. I'm also warning the newspapers particularly opposition party-owned tabloids to be extra careful from now," he said.

Ibrahim, who is responsible for the legal portfolio following his appointment as a Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, said he himself would take the initiative to sue those who slandered the government.

Asked to elaborate on the type of slanders he was referring to, he said the opposition-run newspapers were persistently harping on the issue that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad spent RM200 million government money to build the Prime Minister's new official residence in Putrajaya and used millions of ringgit to buy an executive jet.

"These reports give the impression as though the residence is Dr Mahathir's private home. Also the jet...all these are government-owned assets. The detractors have failed to prove the cost of the residence and the jet as alleged.

"They can make specific allegations like this because we are not intending to muzzle the freedom but they must be prepared to face the consequences," he said.

Ibrahim also took a swipe at the lawyers of former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, for threatening to institute contempt of court action against government leaders including Dr Mahathir for discussing the issues concerning Anwar, who is facing four corruption charges.

The High Court had ordered Anwar to enter his defence on the charges next Monday.

On the contempt of court issue, Ibrahim said, several of Anwar's lawyers made comments including speaking to reporters outside the court on the proceedings of the trial and at the same time, they threatened to take legal action against government leaders for commenting on the case.

"We are now looking at the contempt of court issue raised by Anwar's lawyers. Raja Aziz Addruse, who is leading Anwar's nine-member legal team,

had complained in the High Court about Dr Mahathir commenting on the case while they themselves talk so much on the same matter with journalists.

"Dr Mahathir cannot talk but they can talk. Hence, we are studying this matter from the legal aspects," he said on the gag order issued by Justice Datuk S. Augustine Paul barring comments on Anwar's guilt or innocence on the charges faced by him.

"The government has been on the defensive for far too long and now it needs to take a position to act or be in the offensive," he added.

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