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Mahathir-Rights

HUMAN RIGHTS NOT ONLY RIGHT OF POLITICAL DISSENT, SAYS MAHATHIR

PETALING JAYA, Sept 13 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today the world is rightfully concerned about human rights abuses but human rights is presently interpreted only as the right of political dissent.

Such an interpretation would mean that a citizen must be allowed to express his dissenting views at whatever cost, and if due to his views being expressed there was political instability, riots and killings, these had to be accepted, he said.

"Ideas about human rights are getting more and more peculiar. Impoverishing millions of people, depriving them of medicine, even killing large numbers of them directly or indirectly are not considered violation of human rights.

"But arrest a political dissident and the whole world condemns the government for violations of human rights," he said when opening the 12th Commonwealth Law Conference at the Sunway Pyramid Convention Centre here.

Dr Mahathir said the fact that the government was protecting the rights of millions of other law-abiding citizens was irrelevant as the rights of a political dissident outweighed the wellbeing of the rest of the population.

The prime minister said even legal minds, concerned as they were about justice and fairplay, seemed to be quite unconcerned about what was clearly massive and systematic violations of human rights.

They were more concerned about developing countries not understanding legal processes, were corrupt and were disposed towards poisoning and plotting the overthrow of political rivals.

"Whatever may be the evidence to the contrary, developing countries, former colonies in particular, cannot be doing anything right in the administration of justice as in other things," he said.

About 1,500 members of the legal community, including 29 chief justices, 41 judges, five attorneys-general are attending the four-day conference.

Elaborating, Dr Mahathir said it would seem that the inability to hold dissenting political views imposed tremendous pain on a citizen and that the interpretation of human rights as the right of political dissent would mean that no one should be punished in any way for holding political views different from those of the government.

Dr Mahathir said the government of a country was considered as having violated human rights because it denied a few people the right of dissent while currency traders who deprived millions of their jobs and income, of their lives even, were not considered as having violated human rights.

"It would seem that violation of human rights can only be done by governments while everyone else may oppress millions of people with impunity. Since oppression by people of other people is not considered as violation of human rights, we will not do anything to stop it.

"Indeed we are seeing the rights of currency traders upheld while the rights of their suffering victims are ignored," he said.

The prime minister said to force the leader of a country considered to be an oppressive dictator to surrender, the people of this country were deprived of food and medicine through sanctions.

He said as if this was not enough the country was being bombed continuously in an attempt to force the dictator to submit to international scrutiny of his country resulting in more innocent people being killed.

He said apparently starving these people and killing them did not constitute violation of their rights.

"The death of others, possibly innocent people, is of less importance than a person's freedom to dissent," he said.

Dr Mahathir said on one hand, a country had to behave or it would come in for damaging criticisms, but, on the other hand, a country might be well-behaved but those bent on damaging it could still make adverse and damaging reports.

"People come, they observe and they comment; comments which can be damaging to a country and cost millions of dollars worth of trade. Reporters, TV crew and an assortment of experts fly in and fly out, subjecting a country to close scrutiny," he said.

The prime minister said Malaysia was a democratic country where the rule of law was upheld.

"You may want to check, you are welcome to do so. We have nothing to hide but open minds are necessary for you to judge fairly," he said.

Dr Mahathir said law enforcement and keeping the peace in a country could no longer be done by beating up people and throwing them in the clink with law enforcers must be "gentle and circumspect" because what they did would be televised and shown all over the world.

"But then, how do you deal with a violent, stone-throwing and shop-burning crowd of rioters ? How do you protect the shopkeepers and hawkers from them if gentle persuasion fails ?

"Or, do we dismiss the losses incurred by these traders because the democratic rights of the rioters are far more important than the rights of other citizens ?" he wondered.

Dr Mahathir rhetorically asked why the need for government if governments could not keep law and order and protect innocent citizens.

He said TV crews might be doing a good turn by restraining irresponsible governments but they could also restrain responsible ones from protecting the rights of innocent citizens going about their businesses to earn a living.

He said while the law provided for litigation, it did not provide for damage or even death caused by crowds of rioters.

"If we consider that this is just, then we need to do nothing. But, if we care, we have to formulate new ways and laws which can prevent undue suffering by innocent victims of street riots...Presently they are all being released because there are no concrete evidence," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the way developing countries conducted their legal processes was always found wanting with efforts made to get these countries to conform to the so-called world standards and universal values.

He said it was therefore not surprising that international laws and practices received only scant attention.

"The international financial system is one of them. But more importantly, the structure and and the role of the United Nations have not been subject to any updating in keeping with the times," he said.

He said the Permanent Five - Britain, China, France, Russia and the US - controlled UN affairs and prevented any dissenting voice from being heard and at times even ignored international law and practices.

"Thus they would think nothing of arresting the leader of a country and trying him under the laws of their country...They actually support what may be described as state terrorism, not in their own country but in other countries, frequently weak small ones," he said.

The prime minister said despite being members of the UN, small countries could not seek redress against the oppressive measures taken against them.

"The World Court does not offer this facility as the parties concerned

must agree to abide by its decisions first. And the powerful are not going to consent to judgement by the World Court," he said.

Dr Mahathir said at the dawn of a new millennium, there was not much to say for democracy in the relation between nations where people still lived in a primitive society where might was right.

"Justice and fairplay exist not at all...the rights of individuals should be protected but nations too should be protected, for many individuals make up the nation," he said.

He said liberalisation and deregulation were being touted as the open sesame to a new world economic order but from what people in East Asia had seen, this new order might very well result in their subjugation economically and politically.

"While we believe in democracy, human rights and the rule of law, all these would be meaningless if, directly or indirectly, we are colonised again," he added.

The conference, themed "Law and Society in the 21st Century", is organised by the Commonwealth Lawyers' Association and the Malaysian Bar Council.

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