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Mahathir-Hijack

MAHATHIR SADDENED OVER INDIAN PLANE HIJACK

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 28 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today expressed regret over the hijacking of an Indian Airlines plane last Friday as Indian officials resumed negotiations with the hijackers.

"I feel very much saddened by this," he said in an interview with Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) at the Prime Minister's Department in Putrajaya, near here.

Earlier, RTM recorded the prime minister's New Year message.

"The idea of taking hostages in order to obtain certain concession is something that is very unfortunate," Dr Mahathir said.

It was reported that the Airbus-300 airliner with 189 people on board was seized by the hijackers on Friday as it entered Indian airspace after taking off from Kathmandu's Tribhuvan International Airport in Nepal.

After landing at the Indian city of Amritsar and the United Arab Emirates where the hijackers released 27 passengers, mostly women and children, and the body of an Indian passenger who was stabbed to death, the plane flew to Kandahar in Afghanistan where the Indian officials were currently holding talks by radio with the five or six hijackers.

Dr Mahathir hoped that negotiations with the hijackers would continue and some kind of settlement would prevail.

The hijackers had offered to free all hostages in exchange for Mohammed Azhar Masood, a Pakistani Islamic religious leader held by India since 1994 for allegedly encouraging separatist revolt in Kashmir.

They had also threatened to kill the hostages if their demand for India to free Mohammed Azhar was not met.

Dr Mahathir said hostage-taking incidents were caused by acts of desperation.

"Because they could not get what they want, they have taken hostage innocent people. This is extremely unfortunate," he said.

The prime minister said the hostage situation in Afghanistan was "not new of course."

"People used to hold whole towns and countries hostage," he said.

Citing an example, Dr Mahathir said he would regard the United Nations' (UN) sanctions on Iraq "as holding the people of Iraq as hostages in order to get one person to surrender or to come down."

Dr Mahathir was clearly referring to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

"So this clearly shows this kind of example (holding innocent people hostages), naturally other people are going to follow.

"The world must set an example that nobody, not even nations, should hold as hostage any other nation or people in order to achieve a certain aim," he said.

"If we don't put a stop to that kind of practice, there are going to be many more such situations," Dr Mahathir added.

-- BERNAMA

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