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Mahathir-Timor

MAHATHIR WANTS UN TO SET UP EAST TIMOR PEACE-KEEPING FORCE

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 6 (Bernama) -- Malaysia wants the United Nations (UN) to set up a proper peace-keeping force for beleaguered East Timor immediately in place of the Australia-led Interfet (the international force for East Timor).

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today Malaysia was prepared to send a large military contingent there to serve with the proposed UN peace-keeping mission.

"Malaysia can send a large number of troops there without any problem. At the moment it is not really a peace-keeping force, it is a temporary measure initiated by Australia mainly, but the UN has sanctioned it," he said.

Speaking at an airport Press conference in Subang near here on returning from a two-week working visit to New York, London and Zimbabwe, Dr Mahathir said Interfet was formed because the UN decision-making process on the peace-keeping force was very slow.

"They don't even know where they are going to get the money to finance the peace-keeping force," Dr Mahathir said.

Interfet seeks to maintain order after pro-Indonesia militias went on a murder spree and ransacked the province following an overwhelming vote for independence from Indonesia by East Timorese in last Aug 30 referendum.

Presently Malaysia has a 30-member complement in Interfet led by a brigadier-general.

An earlier batch of about 60 Malaysian military observers and civilian police was deployed to Unamet, the UN assistance mission to East Timor prior to the Aug 30 referendum.

The prime minister's wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali was among those present at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Airport to receive him.

Dr Mahathir was in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe for the 3rd Southern Africa International Dialogue and had earlier addressed the 54th UN General Assembly in New York.

The prime minister said the government would have to initially bear the cost of sending troops for peace keeping in East Timor until the UN pays.

"We are not sharing the cost with the UN. I would like to inform you that when we send troops abroad, we continue to pay them their pay, in addition of course they get the UN pay," he said.

Sending troops to serve in UN peace-keeping forces did not mean that Malaysia was saving money, he said.

"But if the UN doesn't pay, then of course the cost to us is very high. At the moment since they have devalued our currency, now it is 3.8 ringgit to a dollar, before it was 2.5," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the cost to Malaysia in ringgit term was very high, because the soldiers serving abroad would also have to be paid expatriation allowance, among other perks.

"So the UN should bear the cost of this thing because in a way this (problem in East Timor) happened because the UN allows this thing...some agencies of the UN actually forced Indonesia to hold the referendum at the time when Indonesia was not in a position actually to campaign, to get the Timorese to support integration," he said.

Stating that a referendum was almost like an election, Dr Mahathir Minister said it was not fair to have an election where only one party was allowed to campaign.

"We would like to do this, where the opposition cannot campaign, the government can campaign but would you think that is fair, but this is what happens in Timor Timur (East Timor).

"One side persuaded the Timorese that you become independent... they will receive aid, they will be protected, they will be defended and naturally, the Timorese, although they have been with Indonesia for 35 years, they decided that they should become independent," he said.

Dr Mahathir said if a period of campaigning was allowed to Indonesia to explain to the Timorese why they should be integrated with the republic, the result was yet to be ascertained.

"This is my opinion, it is not an Indonesian opinion, it's just my view that in everything we have to be just, we have to be fair to people, we have to be fair to countries," he added.

-- BERNAMA

AFY RYN