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PM poses human rights question to lawyers

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Why are lawyers, concerned about justice and fair play, seemingly unconcerned about massive and systematic violations of human rights?

This was the question posed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to the 1,400 international lawyers attending the 12th Commonwealth Law Conference here.

He said they were more concerned about how developing countries had not understood legal processes, were corrupt and disposed to poisoning and plotting to overthrow political rivals.

He said actions which impoverished millions of people were not considered violations of human rights but a Government was condemned by the world when it arrested one political dissident.

"There seems to be something wrong in our perception of things," he said.

He said even as the world became smaller and every country becomes next-door neighbours to one another, there were no equitable laws to govern their relations. "We are still living in a primitive society in which might is right, justice and fair play exist not at all," he said.

He said there now seems to be something wrong in the perception of things and ideas about human rights are getting "more and more peculiar".

Speaking at length about currency traders, an unbalanced world trade system, United Nations and injustices in the world, Dr Mahathir urged the international jurists to look into these problems.

He said while they would be interested in the administration of justice in developing countries like Malaysia, he hoped they would have time to focus also on the problems of international relations in trade and finance.

He said they should also look into human rights other than the right of political dissident, and into the onrush of a globalised world where small countries are exposed to "marauding industrial and commercial giants."

Dr Mahathir said as the world's attention was focused on the way developing countries conduct their legal processes, it was not surprising that international laws and practices receive only scant attention.

"Malaysia is a democratic country where the rule of law is 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.

Speaking about the injustices in world trade, he said a rapidly growing country can suddenly become a basket case because its currency had been devalued by currency traders.

But if as a result people lose their money, riot and kill, if Government and businesses went bankrupt, that did not make the traders guilty of any crime, he said.

Yet, he said, there was resistance to laws being passed to make currency trading illegal or even just to regulate it.

"It is clear that perceptions of rights and wrong, fair and unfair have changed. Systems are now regarded as more important than the results they produce. A free market must never be regulated even if it destroys nations and people," he said.

Dr Mahathir also said there was a very distorted perception of right and wrong where human rights was presently interpreted only as the right of political dissident.

A citizen must be allowed to express dissenting views at any cost but if his views caused political instability and riots, these have to be accepted, he said.

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

Dr Mahathir said the Government is deemed to have violated human rights because it denied a few people of the right to dissent but currency traders who deprived millions of jobs and income, were not considered violators.

He also touched on the unfairness and inequity which can result from free trade.

He said a country with a huge market which gives its industries tremendous economies of scale must now be allowed to compete freely with the tiny industries at a small country.

"This is considered fair because the playing field is level. That giants are being fielded against midgets is of no consequence," he said.

He said this was far from improving world trade when poor countries cannot compete and cannot earn foreign exchange.

"The poor countries will have no money to buy foreign goods. Trade will contract as a result," he said.

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