

17/10/1999

PM: US leaders should be more sensitive in dealing with us

KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Malaysia will try to foster good ties with the United States but US leaders should be more sensitive in dealing with the country, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The Prime Minister said he was still sore with US Vice-President Al Gore who last year saluted the supporters of jailed former Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Asked in an interview with Reuters on how he saw ties with Washington one year after Gore made the infamous speech in Kuala Lumpur, Dr Mahathir said: "I must say that Al Gore's speech still rankles. We are very sore about it.

"We would like to be as friendly as possible to the United States but statements being made off and on do not help."

He said the United States made several "unkind remarks" about Malaysia without due examination.

"Courts' decisions for example were not thoroughly studied before remarks were made. It was just an off-the-cuff remark and it affects our credibility," he added.

But Dr Mahathir said the sharp rhetoric would not hurt long-term ties between the two nations.

"I think we will continue to try to have good relations with the United States.

"But I do hope that leaders in the United States are more sensitive and will stick to facts rather than come here and make statements that these demonstrators are brave people and things like that," he said.

On East Timor, he said Malaysia was ready to lead UN peacekeepers there despite the reservations of East Timorese independence leaders.

"If we are given the role of commander of the UN forces, yes," Dr Mahathir said. "We have done this in Somalia and we think we have enough experience."

"We have been very supportive of the UN and I think we have a legitimate hope that we would be appointed as commander of the UN forces in East Timor," he added.

East Timor independence leader Jose Ramos-Horta had said on Friday that the territory would not accept the leadership of Asean members for a UN transitional administration.

"We will not accept anyone from the Asean because they are not neutral, they have been accomplices of Indonesia," the 1996 Nobel Peace laureate had said.

The UN peacekeeping force will take over from the multinational intervention force, known as Interfet, which was sent to restore peace and security in East Timor.

It can only be activated when the Indonesian Parliament ratifies the Aug 30 referendum in which East Timor opted for independence.

Speaking from his office, Dr Mahathir spoke against western pressures on East Timor and the rest of Asia.

"What we see is that there is a lot of foreign involvement in the independence of East Timor," he said.

"We see pressures being applied and we worry that such pressures may later be applied to other countries as well. And I think it is not a healthy trend," Dr Mahathir said.

"Once you accept the principle that you can interfere, then I think the

urge to interfere will be very great."

Dr Mahathir also criticised the military coup in Pakistan, saying holding elections was the only way to remove an elected government.

"I regret the coup," he said.

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