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`PM has pre-empted defence on contempt issue'

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's lawyers today raised in court the Prime Minister's statement yesterday that he was not in contempt of court for his speech at the Umno General Assembly.

Defence counsel Karpal Singh said Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was pre-empting the defence's plan to file an application to cite him for contempt.

"Before the court can even entertain a written application, the Prime Minister said he was not in contempt of court," he said at the outset of today's hearing.

Karpal was referring to Dr Mahathir's closing speech at the assembly yesterday where he had said he was merely relating what had happened.

Dr Mahathir was responding to the defence's application on Saturday to cite him for contempt for his opening speech where he had spoken about Anwar's morals and conduct.

On Saturday, judge Datuk Arifin Jaka had told the defence to file a formal application if it felt that the speech was contemptuous.

He told the defence this again today, saying the Prime Minister was entitled to have his say on what he believed and a formal application should be made if the defence wanted to pursue the matter.

"This is a separate issue and a separate application has to be made in the proper manner. I am not prepared to consider whether he was in contempt or not," he said.

Attorney-General Tan Sri Mohtar Abdullah also defended Dr Mahathir, saying "the Prime Minister is perfectly entitled to say what he did".

"The Prime Minister is entitled to his opinion and firm conviction that he's not in contempt for the reasons that he says," Mohtar said.

He also urged the defence to stop "ventilating and re-ventilating" this issue for an oblique and political motive, and to stop using the court as a vehicle.

Karpal replied that it was a question of whether the Prime Minister was interfering with proceedings and intimidating the court. He said it was not a question of a political motive.

"Obviously, his conscience is troubling him. Before he is charged, he says he is not guilty," said Karpal.

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