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`No special treatment for Western journalists'

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PETALING JAYA, Wed. - Americans, obsessed with the jailing of Canadian journalist Murray Hiebert, are even implying that Western journalists should not be jailed if they break the law, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The Prime Minister said he was asked about Hiebert at every opportunity during his recent visit to New York for the United Nations General Assembly.

"They kept repeating this question over and over again. Wherever I went, this was the question. But when I went to Europe, nobody asked me that," he told reporters at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Airport upon his return from Zimbabwe.

Dr Mahathir had attended the Third Southern Africa International Dialogue in Victoria Falls after his visit to London and New York.

He said an American journalist had even asked him if he felt ashamed over the jailing of a Western journalist.

"I had to reply that I make no distinction between a Western or Eastern journalist," he said, adding that he also told them that they had to get their priorities right.

Dr Mahathir said there were thousands of people being massacred all over the world and their fate deserved more attention from the people who could help, like the powerful countries, than the fate of one journalist who was jailed for only six weeks.

Hiebert, the Far Eastern Economic Review bureau chief in Kuala Lumpur, was jailed on Sept 11 for committing contempt of court over an article which he wrote about a pending court case.

He is due to be released on Monday.

The Prime Minister said the Americans made such a fuss over Hiebert's jailing "as if Western journalists should never be jailed".

"Obviously, the implication is that Eastern journalists can be jailed. As far as I am concerned, we don't discriminate. Everybody is equal before the law of our country," he said.

Dr Mahathir said while even the King was subject to the law, the Americans seemed to say that Western journalists could not be touched if they had committed a crime.

"This, I cannot accept," he said.

He also said Hiebert's case was a court matter and the Government had no authority to direct the court not to jail a Western journalist.

He said he understood now why the issue of American soldiers "missing in action" in Vietnam was such a big deal to Americans while the Vietnamese themselves had lost tens of thousands of their own people.

"It's a very big thing because it's Western people," he said.

He said some American journalists had even threatened that Americans would pull their investments out of Malaysia.

Asked if Malaysia was perturbed by this, he said it was only the opinion of journalists and not the feeling of investors.

"Investors and businessmen in America are very keen to be involved in Malaysia's economy. I learnt from my visit to Lucent Technologies that they were very positive about the Multimedia Super Corridor."

Lucent Technologies is a telecommunications research facility in New Jersey.

Dr Mahathir said there appeared to be a dichotomy whereby investors

wanted to keep on investing in Malaysia while the journalists thought it their duty to stop them.

Asked about East Timor, he said Malaysia wanted the United Nations to set up a peacekeeping force immediately. He said Malaysia was willing to send a large troop but at present, it had to bear the cost.

"The cost to us in ringgit terms is very high ... since they have devalued our currency," he said, adding that the UN should bear the cost because it had put into action events which resulted in the bloodbath.

He said the UN had insisted on a referendum at a time when Indonesia was not in a position to campaign.

"We don't know what would be the result if a period of campaigning was allowed for Indonesia to explain to the Timorese. This is my opinion, it's not the opinion of Indonesia.

"My view is that in everything, we have to be just, we have to be fair to the people and we have to be fair to the country."

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