

Focus on social problems at home, Dr M tells Howard

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SYDNEY, Wed. — Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says Australian Prime Minister John Howard should pay more attention to serious social problems at home rather than be a regional bully or teach Asian nations what to do.

The Prime Minister told Australia's SBS Television in a pre-recorded interview that Australia's problems included the deteriorating relations with indigenous Aborigines, the country's most disadvantaged group.

"You have a Prime Minister who doesn't even recognise that you have a problem about this stealing one generation of Aborigines.

"Your law as applied has been very unfair to the aboriginal people, so I think it is better for you to look at home, where you have a lot of racial problems, and solve that before trying to solve other people's problems," Dr Mahathir said.

"If Australia wants to be a friend of Asia, it should stop behaving as if it is there to teach us how to run our country.

"It is a small nation in terms of numbers and it should behave like a small nation and not be a teacher."

The interview with Dr Mahathir was recorded at the Group of 77 summit in Cuba last month and was aired last night.

Australian Treasurer Peter Costello played down the impact of Dr Mahathir's comments, saying Australia's strong economy during the recent Asian economic crisis had enhanced its regional role.

"We have strong relations in the Asian region... we have strong commercial ties and we will follow those commercial ties."

Australia and Malaysia became embroiled in a diplomatic row in 1993 when former Prime Minister Paul Keating branded Dr Mahathir a "recalcitrant" for not attending the first Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation summit in Seattle.

The two gradually mended their rift, with Dr Mahathir coming to welcome Keating's policy of engagement with Asia.

Canberra's relationship with some parts of Asia was hit again when Australia led a multinational force into East Timor to restore peace when pro-Jakarta militias, backed by Indonesia's military, rampaged after the region voted for independence.

Dr Mahathir also criticised Howard for changing the policy started by Keating and interfering in Indonesia.

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Dr M: Howard not welcome in Malaysia because he thinks we are undemocratic

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“You know you have a policy that was formulated by Keating and then you change your policy because you now feel that Indonesia is weak and you can impose your will,” Dr Mahathir said in a transcript of the interview.

“I mean if you have a policy you should stick to that policy and not change it simply because you think you can bully others.”

Canberra has tried gingerly to repair its ties with Indonesia and other parts of Asia since the East Timor mission.

Howard is one of few regional leaders yet to meet the well-travelled Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, who has visited

more than 20 countries since coming to power last October.

Abdurrahman was to have visited Australia in May but that trip was cancelled because of anti-Australian sentiment at home. Another meeting has been tentatively rescheduled for later this year.

Indonesia has also accused Australia of running spy flights over its territory before and after the East Timor operation.

Tension was further fuelled when an Australian soldier serving with the UN administration in East Timor was sent home for offering an East Timorese man A\$20 (RM43.32) to spy on Indonesian West Timor in April.

Asked by SBS whether he thought Howard was welcome in

the region, Dr Mahathir said: “No, I don’t think so. Not in Malaysia, anyway... because he thinks we are undemocratic, we are unjust. He thinks his favourite politician in Malaysia (Anwar) should not face the law, that any finding that is not in his favour would be regarded as an injustice. Obviously, he has preconceived ideas.”

Howard in reply told reporters that a three-day trip to South Korea, which begins on Thursday, showed he was welcome in Asia.

“Korea is Australia’s second-best customer. Our best customer is Japan.”

Asked to describe his relationship with Dr Mahathir, he said: “Cordial.” He declined further comment. — Reuters/AFP