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Avoid religious sentiments: PM

Kamarul Yunus

DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday chided the foreign media for playing up religious sentiments when reporting on efforts by the Philippines authorities to release 21 people held captive by an armed group in southern Philippines.

The Prime Minister said if the foreign media made any attempts to highlight such sentiments in their reports, it would dampen any efforts on the part of the Philippines authorities.

"It (using religious sentiments) will create problems for everyone... It will stiffen the back of the group responsible and the tendency is that they will turn around and fight," he told reporters after attending the Thomas/Uber Cup Run 2000 in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Dr Mahathir was asked whether attempts by the foreign media in highlighting religious sentiments in their reports would dampen efforts to rescue the victims which include nine Malaysians.

On Saturday, the Philippines television stations aired footage taken by the foreign media which showed interviews with a mayor, a priest and family members of the Philippine soldier who died in a clash with the group responsible for the kidnapping.

During the interviews, they were quoted as saying that should anything happen to the victims, the Muslims in Mindanao should be held responsible and that the armed group should be eradicated.

As such, Dr Mahathir advised the foreign media against playing up religious sentiments when reporting on efforts by the Philippine authorities to secure the release of 21 hostages of the armed group.

The nine Malaysians and 12 foreigners were kidnapped by six gunmen in Sipadan Island on April 23 and are now being held in a hideout of the Abu Sayyaf separatist group in Jolo Island in southern Philippines.

The foreigners comprise three Germans, two South Africans, two Finns, two French, two Filipinos and a Lebanese.

Dr Mahathir said it was expected of the foreign media to raise such sentiments as they, he claimed had not been responsible and had not thought about the safety of the victims when carrying out their duties.

"This is something that will feed their agenda for the region, Malaysia in particular and Muslims in general," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the local and foreign media should play a positive role by ensuring that their reports take into account the safety of the victims.

He said they must avoid making any reports that could jeopardise any efforts to secure their release.

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