

12 OCT 2000

Mahathir-Debate

DEBATE ON MALAY RIGHTS NECESSARY, SAYS MAHATHIR

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 12 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the proposed debate between the leaders of the Umno and PAS youth wings on Malay special rights and privileges is necessary to enlighten the people on the issue.

However, he said he was unsure how the debate would be carried out.

"We need to debate the matter out but I am not sure how they are going to go about debating it. There is a need for such debate so as to avoid confusion among the people," he said.

He was speaking at an airport press conference on his return from a 10-day working visit to Britain and a brief trip to Bosnia Herzegovina en route to Kuala Lumpur.

Dr Mahathir, who is also Umno president, was commenting on Umno Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein's decision to hold a debate on Malay special rights with PAS youth leader Mahfuz Omar. The date and venue have not been fixed yet.

Several Umno and PAS leaders had earlier advised that the debate be called off as it would be a futile exercise and could not do much to resolve problems.

However, Terengganu Menteri Besar and PAS deputy president Abdul Hadi Awang said today he would like to see the debate proceed as planned but it must be held in an atmosphere of brotherhood.

Dr Mahathir was asked whether he was prepared to debate with Kelantan Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat who had earlier said there was nothing to gain from it as Hishammuddin and Mahfuz were "lower rung leaders" who could not make decisions.

Dr Mahathir said: "He (Nik Abdul Aziz) is not in the position of power, he is only the head of a small state, if he is prime minister then we are equal and even so he is not a party president."

Asked whether the Umno and PAS presidents themselves need to debate the matter, Dr Mahathir said it did not have to be at that level as Umno has the people who could argue the matter out.

Asked on the possibility of the opposition using the debate issue to woo support, Dr Mahathir said: "They can try and we can also try."

On non-governmental organisations discrediting him and the country abroad, Dr Mahathir said they have the right to do so.

The prime minister said when he met Muslim individuals during his visit to Britain, some Pakistani youths demonstrated.

"I do not know what has it got to do with us, but the demonstrators were not our people," he said.

On the opposition being involved in overseas smear campaign against him and Malaysia, Dr Mahathir said the opposition was indeed inciting students "by spreading lies and not at all upholding the truth".

This was normal for the opposition to do internally or abroad, he said.

On the proposed formation of Puteri Umno and Wanita Umno's insistence on a 25-year-old age limit for membership of the former, Dr Mahathir said Umno would discuss the matter and see what would be suitable.

He added that it was an Umno's internal matter.

-- BERNAMA

AFY MAM ES RYN