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Don't be disheartened, police told

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today said the police should not be disheartened by the inquiry into police brutality by the Malaysian Human Rights Commission.

The inquiry, he added, should also not disrupt the force from discharging its duties.

The Prime Minister said the Government would not be easily influenced by findings of the commission unless the claims could be substantiated.

The inquiry is being held to look into claims of police brutality over an abortive attempt by Opposition supporters to hold a gathering in Jalan Kebun in Klang on Nov 5.

Speaking at a dialogue with 500 senior police officers at Bukit Aman, Dr Mahathir said: "To reflect our sincerity, we have to allowed Suhakam to determine the truth behind the claims (police brutality) but this does not mean that we want to stop the police from doing their job."

He said when confronted with demonstrations, which sometimes turned violent, the Government realised that the police had no choice but to use force.

"So, I hope the police will not be too unduly worried about Suhakam," he said.

Dr Mahathir said those accusing the police of brutality did so not so much because of the alleged violence that had been committed by the police but driven by other motives.

However, the Prime Minister said there had been cases where police personnel had abused or overstepped their authority like the recent incident where a policeman shot dead a teenager.

"Investigations have to be carried out to ensure justice is served to the victims as well as the police. We want the police to have a clean image."

Dr Mahathir expressed hope that such incidents, including the death of detainees while under police detention, would be reduced.

The Prime Minister spoke on the factors behind the rapid progress of the country, which included sound government policies and a professional police force.

He stressed that the police should be professional and not take sides when carrying out their duties in maintaining law and order.

He warned of the consequences if government servants, including the police and army - who should be loyal to the government of the day - were to take part in political or racial disputes.

If the police were to take sides, which would inevitably lead to factions among the ranks, Dr Mahathir said the country could be destroyed as the police would not be able to discharge their work accordingly.

"A neutral force would enhance the people's belief in the police institution and the police would in turn get the people's support," he said, adding that the force had so far displayed a high level of professionalism.

"The people know that when in danger or trouble, they can turn to the police for assistance, and the police will also extend help without looking at other considerations."

In some countries, he said, there had been instances where the police and army were divided due to different political affiliations, and they were unable to carry out their duties professionally.

He said the police, however, could refuse to obey the government if they were directed to perform tasks outside the law.

He said professionalism, discipline and loyalty must be maintained at all times, whether it concerned units or the whole force.

Dr Mahathir also touched on the role of the media, especially foreign ones, which he felt could hamper the police from discharging their duties efficiently.

He felt the force should not fear that their actions may be portrayed by the media negatively.

"There have been cases where the police used force and their actions received coverage, including from the foreign media which tended to portray Malaysian police negatively.

"When confronted with this (coverage), the police will either refrain from using force or choose not to act at all. In the end, they may become the victims, but of course the foreign media is not interested to show policemen being beaten by demonstrators."

If the police were to adopt such an attitude, Dr Mahathir said it would only lead to demonstrators becoming bolder and more violent when they realised that the police were powerless to act against them.

This, he added, might prove detrimental to the police which would then be less efficient, especially in dealing with illegal demonstrations and assemblies.

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