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Dr M hits out at foreign media reports

KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today criticised the foreign media for playing up religious sentiments when reporting the Pulau Sipadan hostage-taking incident.

The Prime Minister said such irresponsible reporting could hinder efforts to secure the release of the 21 hostages, including nine Malaysians, now held by Abu Sayyaf rebels on Jolo Island in the southern Philippines.

He said using religious sentiments would create problems for everybody.

"It will stiffen the back of the Abu Sayyaf group and when people are pushed into a corner, the tendency is that they will turn around and fight," he said after attending the Kuala Lumpur Thomas/Uber Cup Run 2000 at Dataran Merdeka.

Dr Mahathir was earlier asked whether attempts by the foreign media in highlighting religious sentiments in their reports would hurt efforts to rescue the hostages.

Yesterday, local television stations aired footage taken by the foreign media which showed interviews with a mayor, a priest and family members of a Filipino 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.

"You can expect this kind of reporting from the foreign media ... not to be responsible, not to think of the safety of hostages but looking for something that will fit in with their agenda for this region, the agenda against Malaysia in particular and Muslims in general," Dr Mahathir said.

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