

09 MAR 2000

Mahathir-Acheh

KL REGARDS ACHEH AN INTERNAL PROBLEM, SAYS MAHATHIR

By: Syed Jamil Jaafar

JAKARTA, March 9 (Bernama) -- Malaysia regards the Acheh issue as Indonesia's internal problem and does not wish to see the province break away from the republic, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

Malaysia's policy was not to provide assistance to any separatist movement, he said at a joint press conference with Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid at Istana Negara here today.

The prime minister was responding to questions from Indonesian journalists on Malaysia's stand on the Acheh issue.

Asked whether Malaysia was prepared to be a mediator in resolving the problem, Dr Mahathir said he had had the opportunity to meet religious leaders from Acheh and had told them that Malaysia would like to see Acheh remain a province within Indonesia.

The prime minister said that was about all the extent of Malaysia's role.

On the question of greater autonomy for Acheh, the prime minister said it was up to the parties concerned to negotiate.

Dr Mahathir arrived here this morning for an official visit to reinforce solidarity between Malaysia and Indonesia, two very close neighbours.

Dr Mahathir is accompanied by wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali and four ministers -- Tun Daim Zainuddin (Finance), Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar (Foreign Affairs), Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz (International Trade and Industry) and Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik (Primary Industries).

Also accompanying the prime minister is a 150-strong business delegation led by Malaysia Airlines (MAS) chairman Tan Sri Tajudin Ramli, who is also president of the Malaysian Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia was willing to be of assistance if asked.

The prime minister said Abdurrahman, or fondly known as Gus Dur, informed him that the Acheh problem was less intense now.

-- BERNAMA

SJ RYN