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PM thanks those who did not take part in demo

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today thanked supporters of Parti Keadilan Nasional who did not support a demonstration last week, saying it augered well for the country.

"They know they have representation in Parliament and State Assemblies which are the best places for them to voice whatever opposition they have.

"This is a good sign as it would help to ensure peace and progress for the country," said Dr Mahathir who is Umno president.

He was speaking to reporters after the party's supreme council meeting at Umno headquarters here.

Dr Mahathir said the party was also relieved that the plan to have demonstrations last week to mark "Black 14th" did not receive the support of the people.

He was also glad that the situation in the country was calm with no problems although some people were detained during the gathering.

"We are of the view that the Government's duty is to protect the people's interests. They went about their daily business and did not lend their support as they would have lost business.

"Perhaps the country too would have lost through a drop in tourists and other revenue," he said.

Dr Mahathir was asked about Opposition allegations that at least five demonstrators arrested last Saturday were beaten in police custody, deprived of medical attention, change of clothing and clean conditions in their cells.

"Prove it. They have good lawyers, let's see them prove that Malaysian police always beat demonstrators," he said.

"But I see these demonstrators beating Malaysian policemen and burning their motorcycles. Why can't the Opposition lawyers raise this matter?" he asked.

Asked about demonstrators being detained for another week on a police request and if this was harsh and too long, he said: "It is harsh for them to go out and demonstrate and deprive people of their day off. They should know when they are wrong. If they demonstrate they cannot expect to stay in the best hotels as they know they will be arrested. You do it, you have to face the consequences."

Dr Mahathir was also asked whether the detention of a 17-year old student was harsh.

"Students in schools and universities had been told not to demonstrate. If they feel they have to exercise their rights, then the Government must also exercise its responsibility," he said.

Asked if he had any message for US Vice-President Al Gore whose capital Washington had been rocked by demonstrations against the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, he said 600 people had been arrested there, many very violently.

"You know of the policemen who fired 49 bullets at a black man, 19 of which hit him. That is what we see in America. They are a great democracy. We are not a democracy.

"They sit in judgment of us on human rights," he said.

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