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PM: Don't blame the Saudis

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PENDANG, Fri. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the people should stop blaming the Saudi Arabian and Malaysian governments over the recent arrest of Malaysians who had overstayed in Mecca to perform the haj.

He said while Saudi Arabia had to impose quotas for each country yearly to prevent overcrowding in the Holy city, the Government, despite wanting to see more Malaysians perform their religious obligation, was forced to abide by the quota.

"The Government did not prevent (people from performing the haj), the Government in fact tried to send more people, but the Saudi Government had given us certain quota."

"This we have to accept... our quota is one per cent of our population so we send 22,000 pilgrims a year," he said in his speech at an Aidil Adha feast at the Paya Sena mosque, near here.

Dr Mahathir said as some two million Muslims from all over the world go to perform the pilgrimage every year, it would be difficult for the Saudi Government to control the crowd if more people were allowed to perform the haj. Moreover, the numbers are also growing quickly each year.

As such, those who encountered problems when they were arrested for overstaying must not be angry with the Saudi Government.

"We are the ones who are at fault," he said.

More than 300 Malaysians were arrested for overstaying and deported to Malaysia recently.

The Prime Minister said the people should realise that the Saudi Government had decided not to set the quota based on the number of Muslims in the country but the total population.

There were also times when the Saudi Government allowed Malaysia to send more than its allowable quota.

In 1997, the Saudi Government launched an international campaign in which pilgrims were reminded against overstaying by using their Umrah visas in Mecca, a move to prevent overcrowding in the city.

It also warned Saudis against harbouring those who overstayed as they could be fined 100,000 rials (RM100,000) for the offence.

Earlier, Pendang Umno division chief Datuk Othman Abdul said a religious teacher (ustaz) of a secondary school here had blamed Dr Mahathir for the arrest of the Malaysians in Mecca.

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