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Syed Hamid-Suhakam

SUHAKAM'S SETTING UP ENHANCES MALAYSIA'S REPUTATION

By: Harlina Samson

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 23 (Bernama) -- The setting up of the Malaysian Human Rights Commission (Suhakam), regarded as a bold move, has enhanced the reputation of the country which is increasingly respected in terms of human rights, said Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar.

He said more encouraging was that Suhakam had succeeded in generating discussions and exchange of views on the issue of human rights among the people.

The government, he said, had taken a step which was bold, open and transparent in setting up the independent commission under the act of Parliament.

"Bear in mind that Suhakam was set up even though the human rights concept advocated by the West is not suited to the value system in Malaysia," he told Bernama in an interview recently.

Syed Hamid also commented on allegations that the composition of Suhakam's members is not independent and has an agenda of its own.

He said that Suhakam's membership had received positive reaction from the public including the international community.

"Many outsiders have expressed the view that the members appointed are very credible, of integrity. As such, it is up to the people to judge later when Suhakam has carried out its tasks," he said.

Syed Hamid said that Suhakam's members had been selected from a list of names proposed to the ministry and later screened.

"Selection was very thorough. We took almost a year to select...those who will have the time, are dedicated, with reputation and status and who can perform their duties well," he said.

Only then, he said, was the list of names of those selected handed over to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for them to be nominated as candidates to be consented to by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah.

The selection of the 13 Suhakam members was based on, among other things, their standing as respected individuals in society, their understanding of issues of human rights and society besides their qualification, reputation and capability.

"The basis for the appointment of these individuals is that they must have integrity, credibility and independence.

"It (Suhakam) must also have members representing the various races and religions, expertise and age levels," he said.

Suhakam was set up under the Human Rights Commission Act 1999. The Act was gazetted on Sept 9, last year and enforced on April 20, this year.

Suhakam's chairman is Tan Sri Musa Hitam who was Malaysia's representative at the United Nations Human Rights Commission from 1993 to 1998.

The other 12 members are former Supreme Court judge Tan Sri Harun Hashim, former Chief Justice of Malaya Tan Sri Anuar Zainal Abidin, Sabah Public Service Commission Chairman Tan Sri Simon Sipaun, former Forest Research Institute of Malaysia Director General Datuk Dr Salleh Mohamed Nor, social activist Datuk Lee Lam Thye, former Court of Appeal judge Datuk Mahadev Shankar, politician Datuk K. Pathmanaban, consumerism activist Prof Mohamed Hamdan Adnan, law lecturer Prof Mehrun Siraj, academician Dr Chiam Heng Keng, Dr Mohammad Hirman Ritom Abdullah and woman activist Zainah Anwar.

Syed Hamid said it was inevitable that anybody at all appointed as a member of the commission would have interest in certain fields because they were members of society representing various interests.

"That is why we have academicians, activists in NGOs, consumerism,

former public officials, social activists, politicians, former judges, lawyers. We need views from the humanities and legal aspects," he said.

He said that Suhakam's membership should not be confined to only those with legal background but there should be flexibility on a wider perspective.

Syed Hamid said that the government realised that there would be individuals (Suhakan members) who would not agree with the government but at the same time the government may not agree with Suhakam.

"We (the government) also have comments and views and opinions and rights as a government which manages and administers the country," he said.

He said that Suhakam had been accepted by society and this had been proven when various groups refer to it various issues relating to their rights and responsibility in terms of the law.

"Proposals and suggestion by Suhakam need not necessarily be agreed to fully by the government," he said.

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