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'Don't take peace for granted'

Joniston Bangkuai

KOTA KINABALU, Thurs. - Calling on the people not to take the prevailing peace in the country for granted, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Malaysia would be thrown into chaos if law and order were disregarded.

He said the people must not take the importance of peace lightly as unexpected incidents such as the kidnapping on Sipadan island and the arms heist in Grik could happen.

Speaking at a Leader with the People function here tonight, the Prime Minister said there were certain groups in Malaysia who were only interested to create chaos and trouble to achieve their objectives.

The function was attended by more than 2,000 people, including heads of the various religious denominations and community leaders.

Also present were Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, Chief Minister Datuk Seri Osu Sukam and State Cabinet Ministers.

"These people have no regard for the majority who want peace," he said, adding that while there was peace the people must always give attention to its importance.

Citing as an example a healthy man who only valued the importance of looking after his health when he fell ill, Dr Mahathir said the people must always be on guard against undesirable elements.

"Because there is peace in Malaysia, we may tend not to value it," he said, adding that the people must be constantly reminded that in Malaysia there are various races and religions.

He said there were people who were too extreme in their thinking and action and had become intolerant of others.

Such groups of people had been taught to hate the Government to the extent that they were willing to take the law into their own hands and resort to violence.

Without naming them, Dr Mahathir said these people had acted in such a way because they formed the majority without considering that they were the minority in other places.

"In certain places we may be the majority but in other places we are the minority so the majority must not discriminate against the minority ... if you are cruel others will be cruel to you also," he said.

The Prime Minister said the people should be thankful that peace had continued to prevail in Malaysia despite the attempts by certain groups to create trouble and instability.

He advised the people to always respect and be tolerant of each other, irrespective of their race and religion.

Earlier, at another function, Dr Mahathir said the system of rotating the Chief Minister's post among the major communities in Sabah would continue if the people were comfortable with it.

"I think it is up to the people of Sabah to decide, not for me to decide. If they feel comfortable with the system, yes go ahead. If they feel that they should have a change, it's up to them," he said.

He was speaking to reporters after opening the United Pasok Momogun Kadazandusun Organisation (Upko) sixth congress today.

Asked what he thought of the rotation system which he introduced in 1994, Dr Mahathir said it had worked well so far.

The system was introduced to enable leaders from the three main communities - Muslim Bumiputera, Chinese and non-Muslim Bumiputera - to

become Chief Minister on a rotational basis for two years each.

Sabah Umno head Datuk Seri Osu Sukam will complete his two- year term as Chief Minister in March 2001, and an assemblyman representing the non-Muslim Bumiputera (Kadazandusun and Murut) community will take over.

Others who have served as Chief Minister under the system are Tun Sakaran Dandai, Datuk Salleh Tun Said, Datuk Yong Teck Lee and Tan Sri Bernard Dompok.

Asked about Parti Bersatu Sabah's claim that the rotation system was a hindrance to the implementation of the State Government's development programmes due to the frequent changes of Chief Minister, the Prime Minister said it was not so.

"Continuity is there and those who had served as Chief Minister before also had no objections to serving (again) as a Cabinet member."

On Upko seeking to amend its constitution at the congress to enable it to set up branches outside Sabah, Dr Mahathir said it was the party's right to decide on the matter.

"We'll see first whether it is well received or otherwise but so far there are no obstacles," he said.

The Prime Minister said although Upko strived for the cause of the Kadazandusuns and Muruts in Sabah, it had also contributed towards improving the lot of the other communities.

"It's up to the Kadazandusuns," said Dr Mahathir when asked whether Upko could function as a vehicle to fight for the community's political cause in Sabah.

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