

PM: BE FAIR

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By WONG SAI WAN

KAMPALA: Malaysian and African leaders have hit out at the foreign media for continuously carrying negative reports about their countries, an act they say has turned away potential investors.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told the foreign press: "Be bold enough to report about the good things that are happening in the country ... Tell the truth.

"If they want the truth, then the

Report our side of the story too, foreign media urged

foreign media should be prepared to print the truth."

He was speaking during an interaction between heads of government and the media at the Global 2001 Smart Partnership International Dialogue here late Sunday.

The interaction, which has become a regular feature at the smart partnership dialogues where

leaders put questions to journalists, saw some sharp criticism being directed at the media for what the leaders claimed to be reporting half-truths rather than the whole story.

Turning to two reporters from *Financial Times* and *Reuters*, Dr Mahathir told them:

"There are a lot of good things going on in Africa. You can do

these people a big favour by reporting these good things.

"Good news will create a positive image and bring in investors and tourists, thus improving the lot of the people."

Dr Mahathir said the Smart News Network International (SNNi) launched here yesterday would provide alternative reporting of the same news that was car-

ried by the foreign media.

After the SNNi signing ceremony, the six presidents, three prime ministers and one vice-president turned the tables on the newsmen and started shooting questions at them, pointing out that most of the news reports on their countries were "one-sided and unfair."

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Tanzanian head: Media must also be held accountable

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Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni, who officially launched the SNNi, said that as democratically elected leaders, they had an obligation to act in the interest of the people of their country.

"This includes choosing the proper time to make statements on certain truths," he said in response to newsmen's claims that most of them could not get the truth from politicians and civil servants in Africa.

Tanzanian President Benjamin Mkapa expressed disdain at the media who pressed for greater accountability and a code of conduct for ministers and at the same time "for

some reason believe freedom of the press is absolute."

"You are also accountable," he said, stressing that there were two sides to a story but only one side was reported.

Dr Mahathir said the SNNi was to enable African and Malaysian newspapers to carry each other's stories without these being "re-interpreted."

"We are not saying that you cannot report your version. We just want to distribute our version," he added.

SNNi chairman Tan Sri Kamarul Ariffin said SNNi Sdn Bhd was registered as a company in Malaysia with a paid-up capital of RM100,000. The shareholders are Utusan Melayu Bhd, New Straits Times Press (M) Bhd, Star Publica-

tions (M) Bhd and the national news agency Bernama.

The news exchange is being carried out via a website hosted by Bernama.

The more than 600 participants at the dialogue gave a

firm commitment on Sunday to use the SNNi as a means to allow African countries to exchange news reports with Malaysian media.

The commitment was contained in a document signed

by the past three host patrons of the dialogue — Museveni, Dr Mahathir and Mozambique president Joaquim Alberto Chissano — who jointly launched the network on Monday.