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Bigger role for envoys with students

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad wants the country's ambassadors to be more active in engaging Malaysian students abroad to counter the anti-Government propaganda being spread to them.

He said some Malaysians were inciting the students, resulting in many of them becoming anti-Government.

"In future, our ambassadors are required to be in close contact with our students.

"Our students (abroad) are not an easy lot to deal with because other Malaysians come to disturb them," he said after attending the Head of Mission Conference at the Palace of the Golden Horses in Seri Kembangan, near here.

Organised by the Foreign Ministry, the six-day conference begins today. It is attended by 86 Malaysian ambassadors, high commissioners, consuls-general, consulate officers and charge'd affaires.

Also present were Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and senior Wisma Putra officials.

The Prime Minister briefed participants before engaging in a dialogue with them. The closed-door sessions were held for over three hours.

Asked how our diplomats fared in explaining Malaysia's policies on issues in the international arena, Dr Mahathir said they had generally done well.

"That's why we could still explain things and defend our position and at the same time carry out our policies with regard to all these countries."

On efforts to clarify misconceptions on Malaysia's stand and policies among many Malaysian students abroad, Dr Mahathir said:

"The students are supposed to fall under the Student Affairs Department, but our ambassadors are taking on an active role."

Dr Mahathir cited the example of the Malaysian High Commissioner to the United Kingdom who he said was very active in meeting students to explain Government policies.

Malaysia is represented in the UK by Datuk Salim Hashim.

Dr Mahathir said no other country gave such serious attention to the welfare of its students studying abroad.

"Only Malaysia has Student Affairs Departments in so many countries," he said, adding that they were all well-staffed.

Asked what transpired during the dialogue, Dr Mahathir said many fielded questions on issues concerning their host countries, including international bodies like the United Nations.

"They wanted to know our general policies on problems facing Malaysia and other countries."

Asked to specify, Dr Mahathir said some wanted an explanation on Malaysia's relationship with the administration of US President George W. Bush.

"They also want to know our policy regarding China, Russia and so on."

The Prime Minister said he also explained the country's foreign policy development since the country's independence.

"We were not that active in the international arena ... following the West's policies. But now we practise a policy of independence, and we feel we have the right to support or criticise where needed."

On feedback from participants on Malaysia's ties with other countries, Dr Mahathir said generally, developing countries supported Malaysia and

highly appreciated the role played by the country.

Syed Hamid was later asked to elaborate on the Prime Minister's call to ambassadors.

"Our ambassadors must interact with and inform the students of Malaysia's policies and our stand on regional and international issues," he said.

Syed Hamid said information on current issues submitted to Malaysia's foreign missions have been continually updated.

"What's important is for us to convey the Government's aims and policies."

On the unease felt by some countries over Malaysia's independent stand regarding international matters, Syed Hamid said Malaysia decided on its foreign policy based on its own interests and that of developing countries.

"If we do not depend on developed countries for assistance but on our own economic strengths, we can defend our sovereignty," he said.