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Eyewitnesses to crime may get government protection

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SHAH ALAM, Mon. - The Government is considering drafting a law to protect eyewitnesses to crimes, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The Prime Minister said the protection was necessary as there had been cases where important eye-witnesses were threatened with dire consequences if they testified in court.

"We know for certain that some witnesses had been threatened and action taken against them for acting as witnesses in certain cases.

"I think (eye)witnesses can be protected, which is something the Government can consider," he told reporters after opening a conference of police commissioners, chief police officers, police commanders and police commandants at the Concorde Hotel here.

Also present were Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who is Home Minister, and Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Norian Mai.

Dr Mahathir was asked to elaborate on issues raised by the officers during the closed-door dialogue held after he had delivered an off-the-cuff speech which centred on crime and democracy.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysians were generally reluctant to assist the police in investigations although crimes occurred "right before them".

He cited several examples of unresolved murders, including that of Lunas State Assemblyman Dr Joe Fernandez, gunned down in broad daylight along a busy road in Bukit Mertajam on Nov 5 last year.

"Many Malaysians prefer not to get involved in police investigations or to appear (in court) as witnesses.

"This is not because they are not public-spirited, but (for fear) that they may be grilled and heckled by lawyers in courts.

"To them, becoming a witness is burdensome. This has caused many clear cut criminal cases to go unpunished," he said.

Dr Mahathir said some lawyers with political leanings also appeared for suspected criminals to gain political mileage, irrespective of whether their clients had committed a crime or not.

They were seen as championing the rights of the people and this had made police work even more difficult, he said. Sometimes, the police ended up being accused of a crime.

Dr Mahathir said although the Government had set up the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (Suhakam) to ensure injustices were dealt with accordingly, this had placed some pressure upon the police.

Although the Government was against police officers using force unnecessarily, it would support the police if it had to use force to quell violent demonstrations.

"The Government will not hesitate to support the police in their duty to maintain peace.

"Although the Government does not want to see the police using excessive force, when you need to use it (excessive force) to maintain peace, then the Government will stand behind the police," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the Government would also look into the possibility of reviewing all laws related to printing, sedition and criminal acts so that they were suitable for the current situation.

"In many of the (related) laws, the punishment is not commensurate with the crime committed, the fines are meagre... there is no deterrent effect at all," he said.

Citing an example, he said, the Printing and Presses Act 1984 needed to be amended to ensure those who circulated seditious material over the Internet could also be prosecuted.

"Information can easily be downloaded (from the Internet) on paper and distributed just like other documents... just like newspapers."

"If not checked, crime will be openly committed. This will only make police work difficult."

Dr Mahathir said with a more informed society, the people would find loopholes in the laws and circumvent them for their benefit.

Police needed to equip themselves with knowledge, particularly IT-related, to carry out their duties effectively.

As there were many lawyers well-versed with police work, criminals would be acquitted if police could not produce sufficient evidence.

"We cannot rely on a force which has lower qualifications. Today, we need police personnel with higher qualifications and who are specialised in specific areas of law, medicine, business and IT," he said.