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Government needs to act swiftly to stop irresponsible reporting

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IF a spade is to be called a spade, then the report by The Sun which alleged that the Prime Minister and his deputy were to be assassinated should be denounced as irresponsible journalism.

One can go straight to the point and say that the report not only put Malaysia in a bad light but also brought disrepute to journalists and journalism in Malaysia.

We can be sure that the disappointment expressed by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad over the report is shared by millions of Malaysians.

The report said the "hit" on Dr Mahathir and Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi would be carried out in a month or two by a hired killer nicknamed "Raja Commando".

The report was picked up by foreign news agencies and transmitted worldwide, giving the impression that Malaysia is a terrorist State, infested by bandits and hired killers.

Being a Muslim nation, Malaysia is already under the watchful eyes of the international community.

Although most countries have now accepted Malaysia as a moderate Islamic state which can be a role model to others, a few nevertheless, still view Malaysia suspiciously.

This is reflected in the recent decision by the United States to introduce a stricter approval process for visa applications from Malaysians.

The Sun report added credence to the belief that as a Muslim state, Malaysia must be harbouring terrorists.

It is both unwarranted and ill-judged because of the damage it may cause to the country's economy and the fear it may instil in potential investors.

While the world economy is on the brink of collapse, Malaysia is trying its best to keep foreign investments flowing in.

The Sun report, most certainly, put a dent in these efforts.

If the allegation had been true, then it would have been a different matter altogether.

Obviously it is not because the report merely quoted police sources but the police themselves went on record to say that they have no knowledge of such an assassination attempt.

Even "Raja Commando" (politicians and newsmen know of only one Raja Commando - Parti Keadilan Nasional Shah Alam division deputy chief Raja Kamaruddin Raja Abdul Wahid) categorically denied involvement.

He is now seeking legal advice.

That Dr Mahathir's security detail had been increased has also been denied.

The Sun's motive is clear - to sell the paper, especially since street sales of newspapers on a public holiday such as Christmas Day is usually high.

But overzealous journalism and sensationalism should never be the selling point.

And newspapers must be accountable to their readers.

As has been said, the content of anything that sells itself as journalism should be free of any motive other than to inform its customers or readers.

It should not be influenced by anything else, not even dollars and

cents.

In recent months, we have seen some bad reporting which does not augur well for the nation.

Era Radio, the No 1 radio station in the country, announced a few months ago that then Yang di-Pertuan Agong Sultan Abdul Aziz Salahuddin Shah had died when he was being treated in Mount Elizabeth Hospital in Singapore.

It even went to the extent of airing verses of the yassin immediately after the announcement.

A few weeks later, the Associated Press got it entirely wrong when it quoted Dr Mahathir out of context when he spoke in Parliament on the subject of terrorism.

Both Radio Era and AP later apologised and were let off the hook.

But surely, there must be limits bound by logic and the gravity of the error.

Rumours come in various forms. They must be verified and verified again before they are turned into news.

Rumours are enough to cause panic among those who believe there is no smoke without fire.

If rumours can be taken as gospel truth, then Dr Mahathir has been close to death many times and his Cabinet reshuffled almost every month since the last general election.

Reporting rumours and untruths just to sell newspapers is not only a cardinal sin in journalism, but also a crime under the law.

Therefore, the Government must act swiftly to censure these media organisations before such irresponsible reporting becomes a regular feature.