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`Verdict proves justice prevails'

KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - The High Court's verdict on 19 members of the Al-Ma'unah religious extremist group shows that justice prevails in the country, irrespective of the offender's race or religion.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said although only three of the accused received the death penalty it showed that those who committed murder would not escape the long arms of the law.

"I think the families of the victims too feel that in this country justice prevails, irrespective of race or religion ... whoever commits murder will receive the appropriate sentence according to the law," Dr Mahathir said when asked to comment on the High Court's decision to hang three of the accused.

The other 16 accused in the Al-Ma'unah case were jailed for natural life yesterday.

Dr Mahathir, who is also Barisan Nasional chairman, was speaking to the media after declaring open the 48th annual general assembly of the People's Progressive Party at the Putra World Trade Centre.

Asked if the court decision had somewhat sent a strong signal that the Government did not tolerate religious extremism in the country, Dr Mahathir said the Government had never tolerated such actions.

"The people should know and they should not attempt it," he said, adding that selective prosecution was not the practice in Malaysia.

"We rule based on the law of the land without taking into consideration if those involved are high ranking people or just laymen ... even if the person is a Muslim, a Christian or a Buddhist the law must be enforced."

To another question by a foreign journalist, who asked if he was happy with the court decision, Dr Mahathir said it was not a question of him being happy or overjoyed.

"I'm not happy when somebody is sentenced to death but this is the decision, so it is not a question of happiness or joy, it's a question of justice being upheld," he said.

On the appeal by family members of Nur Misuari for the former Moro National Liberation Front leader to be granted political asylum by Malaysia, Dr Mahathir said this would not be done.

"It is our undertaking that anybody involved in such activities, we will not give shelter," he said, adding that there was no shift in Kuala Lumpur's earlier decision to hand Misuari over to the Philippines.

Dr Mahathir also agreed with the Umno Youth movement's contention that there should be further probe to ascertain the authenticity of Elly Pamatong, who claims to be Misuari's lawyer.

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