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Leaders and media reps exchange views

THE media practitioners and heads of state got a fair share of criticism when they were engaged in a dialogue with presidents and prime ministers attending the Global 2001 smart partnership international dialogue.

While several leaders including Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad gave critical views on the way the media had been presenting their reports, the media people also took the opportunity to tell the heads of state why that had been the case.

While the exchanges between the media and presidents took place, Dr Mahathir offered to give his views.

"It's my turn. Can I have a say?" asked the Prime Minister as journalists were scrambling to give their side of the story after critical views given by other heads of state.

Dr Mahathir introduced himself as someone coming from a country where the "Press is absolutely controlled".

"I have to believe this because the Asian Wall Street Journal and Herald Tribune tell us so," he said, despite being printed in Kuala Lumpur and given the liberty to run down Malaysia.

Dr Mahathir recounted how he had "spent" a week with Newsweek and three days with Asiaweek and they made him to pose for pictures including standing on the ledge.

He said the writers had also wanted to know what he did in his pastime and allowed them to follow him shopping at a shopping complex on a Sunday where people went up to greet him.

But what came out in their reports were a picture of him looking haggard as if he was about to die and a report saying that the people were frightened to go and meet him while at the shopping complex.

Dr Mahathir said he didn't care about such reports but "why distort, why not tell the truth?"

He said when a small street demonstration took place in Malaysia, "Cable News Network showed the clips every hour on the hour" as if the whole country was in chaos 24 hours, discouraging tourists from visiting.

The Prime Minister said all kinds of adverse reports were written about Malaysia including about the country going bankrupt for refusing aid from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

"If you want the truth, prepare to say the truth."

Dr Mahathir said that was why the leaders signed a declaration that paved the way for the launching of the Smart News Network international (SNNi) as an alternative source of news on developing countries.

Concluding his views, Dr Mahathir said when the Press were asked to list three important events which took place in Africa over the past one year, none could give a reply, apparently chiding a Financial Times reporter who claimed that he could list hundreds of it without giving the specific events.

However, after Dr Mahathir had finished, there was silence from the journalists prompting an official to ask whether it was normal for journalists to keep silent when they were on the receiving end.

Earlier, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni said if he was a journalist, he would divide the front page into two parts - half for negative reports and the other for positive stories.

Joaquim Chissano, the President of Mozambique, asked the media practitioners what the heads of government should do in order to get good

news on their pages and a reporter from a foreign news agency replied that the governments should do more off-the-record briefings to the Press.

He also suggested that leaders should engage professional Press officers who could be contacted beyond their nine-to-five working hours which would give the Pressmen more access.

Mark Turner, a Financial Times journalist, said the presidents should tell the media the truth and he recounted his experience of writing a story in Uganda.

He said journalists were forced to go to non-governmental organisations and the Opposition to get the other side of the stories because of the unwillingness of the government to tell the truth.

Turner also asked the governments not to "treat us as a second class citizen".

He also asked the leaders present who at one time were Opposition leaders to express their views on what they felt about the reports on them when they were in the Opposition.

Chissano then asked the journalists what they would do in their situation when an aeroplane carrying only three bags of maize landed in an area and there were thousands of starving people waiting for food.

"Will you tell the truth knowing that there will be a stampede and several people will be killed if they scramble and fight for three bags of maize?" he asked.

Chissano thanked a journalist in front of him for agreeing with him but said: "Some journalists just say 'I don't care'."

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