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Mahathir-Environment

LOCAL NGOs MORE INTERESTED IN EMBARRASSING GOVT, SAYS MAHATHIR

KUALA LUMPUR, June 12 (Bernama) -- Local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which take up environmental issues are more interested in politically embarrassing the government than they are for the environment, the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

"Before they were instigated by foreign NGOs the locals had never given a thought about the environment but now they are prepared to deny their fellow citizens who are poor in order to prove that they are not behind their wealthy counterparts in rich countries," he said.

He said he was suspicious especially of the involvement of NGOs from the rich countries usually responsible for provoking the people in the poor countries and the local NGOs to protest.

"They must know that they are actually perpetuating the poverty of the poor people in the poor countries," he said in a luncheon address at the Oil and Gas Conference 2001 carrying the theme "Balance and Stability: Cooperation Among Producers and Consumers."

Dr Mahathir questioned if the environmentalists were more concerned about the environment and the carbon sink for the benefit of rich countries than they were for the well-being of the poor people in the poor countries.

"Do they (environmentalists) want the poor to continue to be poorer?," he asked, adding that caring for the environment should not be to a point of making the already poor, poorer.

"It is unfortunate that these so-called environmentalists are more concerned about preserving the environment for the rich that they are willing to cheat the poor people in actually protesting against developments for the good of the poor," he said.

He said he could not understand why environmentalists and the NGOs were protesting against the development of hydro-power in poor, energy-starved countries.

He said they must remember that hydro-power projects would benefit many more poor people in need of cheap electricity and that such projects in poor countries could mean greater economic development from industrialisation.

Dr Mahathir said hydro-power was the most viable and cheapest of the non-polluting source of power, reducing the need for costlier and more polluting thermal power stations.

"A poor country can become rich merely by developing hydro-power and selling the excess power that is generated," he said.

Developing hydro-power not only required clearing of forest which would be inundated but also careful preservation of the water-catchment area, he said.

"Of course some people had to be moved out but they can be fairly compensated. Those people who would be moved out will usually be poor but they would actually be much richer from the compensation paid to them," he said.

Dr Mahathir said a country which could not develop its hydro-power potential had to turn to burning oil, gas and coal to generate electricity.

He said while technology had advanced enough to reduce the polluting effect of oil, gas and coal, it cost money to reduce the pollution and at the end of the day it was the consumers, some of whom were poor, must foot the higher cost.

Presently the world burns up some 77 million barrels of oil besides gas

and coal and the figure would be higher in the years to come, he said.

"I am not a fanatic about the environment but I do care about it," he said, adding that burning huge quantities of fuel everyday would contribute to the heating up of the atmosphere, the retreat of the polar ice cap and the rise in sea-level which can drown many island nations.

He said it was time the world gave this high consumption of fuel some thought where the high users should cut down on their consumption.

"You cannot ask the poor to do this. They don't consume much and their reduction in fuel consumption would not have much effect, besides they need the heat and energy for living not luxury," he said.

He said the rich should cut back on fuel consumption and change to less heat-generating energy source.

Money earned from exploitation of oil should be spent on alternative, non-polluting and non-heat generating energy, the prime minister added.

-- BERNAMA

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