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`Some trying to sour Malaysia-US ties'

Firdaus Abdullah

DENGKIL, Sat. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said that certain quarters are trying their best to sour relations between Malaysia and the United States.

He said that these people were always looking out to twist facts and cause friction between the two nations.

Denouncing a notion by Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim via one of his articles in the foreign media, he said that the Government was not anti-American and not involved in any attempt to stir anti-American feeling among Malaysians.

"We have good relations with the Americans although there are some people who are trying to sour our relations with America, they issue all kinds of reports about my statement which are taken out of context," he said when asked if the Government was indeed stirring up anti-American feelings in the wake of the military offensive in Afghanistan.

"If we are anti-America we won't support their attempt to hunt down the terrorists... the only thing is that we disagree on the manner," he said, adding that Malaysia had a few suggestions on how to handle terrorists.

He was speaking after officially launching the Paya Indah Wetlands here today.

He said that Malaysia wanted to be friendly with every nation, including Afghanistan, but had no liking for the Taliban as the authorities were aware that the Taliban had trained Malaysians for the purpose of overthrowing the present Government.

Dr Mahathir said, however, the attacks against Afghanistan could not be justified as there were Afghans who were not Taliban followers

"They have no choice, they live in that country. They don't deserve to be killed," he said.

He added that the coming Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (Apec) meeting in Shanghai, China, would be a good platform for leaders to openly debate the matter "without fear or favour".

"I support freedom of expression; while others often urge us to allow freedom of speech in our country, I'm sure they will also be supportive of open discussions among government leaders."

Dr Mahathir said if core reasons and their remedy could be identified via such engagements, it would be a great contribution to the fight against terrorism.

He reiterated that Malaysia had no other motive apart from wanting to eradicate terrorism.

"It must be done in a way that is effective," he said, adding that Malaysia had some valuable experiences in effectively handling terrorism from its encounter with the Communist terrorist threat.

"We stopped the scourge not only by military means, but also by understanding the root causes of the menace; we studied and identified why people were willing to support them and we were able to correct things."

Dr Mahathir, who is expected to meet US President George W. Bush during the Apec summit, said that personally he felt that one of the main reasons for the recent terrorist attacks were the years of atrocities against the Palestinians and also grave injustices in Chechnya and Iraq.

He said there was also an urgent need for world leaders to discuss and clearly define terrorists.

"World leaders must discuss this and make a clear stand, only then can

we effectively mobilise the whole world to fight against terrorism. We have to act, but how we act is very important."

He was also asked on the US State Department's recent statement that the US might venture beyond Afghanistan in its fight against terrorism and that Malaysia was also one of the Southeast Asian nations identified as having terrorists.

Dr Mahathir said the Government was aware of the existence of a small group of Taliban-trained terrorists out to topple the present administration, but rejected third-party involvement to handle them.

"We admit there are terrorists in the country, trained by the Taliban... the only difference is that these terrorists are directing their attacks at us and we can take care of them, they are not attacking the United States." He assured that stern action would be taken against these terrorists and urged those with information to forward it to the authorities.

On allegations by Anwar in his article in the Oct 15 issue of the Time magazine that the Government was using the recent terrorist attacks as an excuse to stifle political opposition in the country, the Prime Minister said it was untrue.

He said Malaysia had acted against suspected terrorists and those who wanted to apply violence in the country long before the attacks in the US.

"Is he supporting the Al-Ma'unah (religious extremist)? Is he supporting the KMM (Kumpulan Militan Malaysia), those related to the killing of a State Assemblyman, robbing banks, exploding bombs... these are the people (whom we acted upon)."

The Prime Minister said if Anwar supported these groups, he should then state his stand clearly.