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More to be done for poor (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Saying that the poor are easily stirred to violence, the Prime Minister said tonight the Government will take steps to address the problems faced by squatters nationwide.

Citing the recent clashes among residents in Kampung Medan and other settlements off Jalan Klang Lama near here, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the Government felt that the fights were not sparked by racial sentiments but due to social factors, such as poverty.

"We know that this happened in an area where people are very poor and poor people are often stirred to violence," he said.

Dr Mahathir said this at the Malaysian Hindu Sangam's (MHS) 36th anniversary dinner here.

"We will therefore take action to relief the situation there, to overcome some of the inadequacies you find in squatter areas and in the poorer parts of the city.

"We will look of course not only at the particular area in South Petaling Jaya but also all over the country.

"I think we have been a bit neglectful because we became lulled by the figures about poverty in this country.

"We are told that statistics show that poverty is very minimal in Malaysia.

"But we know now that although income in the cities may be higher but the cost of living makes a lot of people rather poor. Now we have to attend to all this.

"We believe that in general the different communities will not be affected by this particular incident."

He said in other countries where many races and religions co-existed, there were many racial problems.

"But since our independence there have been very few instances when people break the peace and go for each other."

By and large, Dr Mahathir said, Malaysians of all races were very tolerant people, and could get along with each other.

"They can work and they can play together.

"This is not found in other multi-racial and multi-religious societies," he said.

However, Dr Mahathir said there might be occasions where some irrational people might want to do things that were not rational.

"And so recently we have seen an unfortunate clash between people of Indian origin and the Malays.

"We are told this is due to a small misunderstanding," the Prime Minister added.

"But a few people tried to make use of this incident and others got involved who were not even from anywhere near the scene where the first quarrel started.

"However, we are fortunate that we have been able to put an end to these racial clashes very early."

Dr Mahathir said the Government was still not satisfied with what had been achieved because it felt that it was not just a racial matter, but also had some social origins.

Dr Mahathir said all Malaysians wanted to live in peace with each other so that the country could be developed and they could benefit from the development.

"Naturally there are differences between us.

"It is not possible even for Muslims to have no differences between them so it not unusual for people of different racial origins as well as different religious definitions not to have differences."

But these differences, Dr Mahathir said, should be settled through discussions.

He said it was the Government's aspiration to see the different communities and religions of this country get proper and just treatment.

On legalising Hindu temples as raised by MHS president A. Vaithilingam in his speech earlier, Dr Mahathir said the Government was aware that there were problems with temples, churches and mosques because they were holy places and they had to be treated with due respect.

"We have tried in Malaysia to be accommodating but I must admit that sometimes it is necessary for us to take action that may not be welcomed by the people concerned, especially when we find that temples are built on illegal sites.

"Sometimes this gives us a problem.

"But I must say that the Indian community has been very co-operative. (MIC president) Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu has always tried to reason it out with temple authorities whenever there is a need for this," he said.

On a request made to declare temples which were situated on legal land as legal entities which should be protected, Dr Mahathir said the Government would study this to find out how best the request could be accommodated.

He also said the request for funds would also be studied.