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PM hits out at foreign NGOs

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today hit out at non-governmental organisations from rich nations for protesting against the development of hydro power in poor and energy-starved countries.

The Prime Minister said their opposition was actually perpetuating the poverty of the people in poor countries.

He said it must be remembered that hydro power would benefit many more poor people who would be in need of cheap electricity.

"In a poor country, it can mean greater economic development from industrialisation," he told delegates to the 6th Asia Oil and Gas conference at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel.

In a speech titled "Co-operation towards an environmentally more friendly and cleaner energy", Dr Mahathir noted that most countries in the North were able to develop and benefit from hydro power at a time when there were still no environmentalists and NGOs.

"With this cheap electricity, they were able to industrialise and develop fast. But today developing hydro power is not only very costly but is plagued by protests by environmentalists and NGOs.

"The unfortunate thing is that most of the new projects are in the poorest countries, where hydro power would give the cheapest source of much-needed electricity."

Dr Mahathir said he was very suspicious especially of the involvement of these NGOs which were usually responsible in provoking their local counterparts and people in poor countries to protest.

He noted the importance of caring for the environment but not to the point of making the already poor, poorer.

If countries could not develop their potential hydro power, they would then have to burn oil, gas and coal to generate electricity.

Dr Mahathir said some 77 million barrels of oil were burnt daily which contributed to the heating up of the atmosphere.

"It is time we give this high consumption of fuel some thought. 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 the energy for living, not for luxury."

On nuclear energy, Dr Mahathir said: "I frankly don't trust nuclear power."

He said the world's knowledge of its use and engineering expertise was still very primitive and there had been many accidents involving nuclear power plants and nuclear-powered submarines and ships.

"It is like a malevolent genie which once released from the bottle, cannot be tamed and put back in again. God forbid that the arsenals of nuclear warheads should ever be fired at anyone.

"As it is, we don't really know whether they can be defused, or decommissioned or rendered harmless. Malaysia will not use nuclear power and we hope others will also not build nuclear power plants."

Dr Mahathir also spoke of petrol subsidies and the fluctuating crude oil prices and the intensity, magnitude and enormous impact it had on economies around the world.

He said the people might be happy to have cheaper petrol but such prices distorted the cost of transport and industrial production. If the products

of the country were exported, it meant the country was subsidising foreign consumers.

"Subsidising domestic prices is a dangerous policy. It distorts economic performance and creates serious social and political problems." When such subsidies were removed for various reasons, the reaction to such stoppage could be very violent, he said.

"Riots, property destruction are common. Occasionally, governments are overthrown."

Countries which suffered the most from high crude prices, Dr Mahathir said, were poor developing nations with no oil reserves. They would have to cut back on using motor vehicles and electricity.

He felt oil-producing nations should consider some kind of support for these countries.

"Discounts or rebates during periods of high oil prices would go a long way towards alleviating their financial problems. It is most inequitable that some countries should have a per capita income of only US\$300 (RM1,140) while others have more than US\$20,000."