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PM on need to explain policies to the people

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today told Information Ministry officials to work harder in explaining Government policies to the people.

The Prime Minister said this was necessary as some irresponsible parties bent on discrediting the Government would attempt to mislead the people by deliberately misinterpreting policies.

This would confuse the people, who would eventually become suspicious of the Government's genuine concerns.

"Some irresponsible people are all the time trying hard to influence the people and mislead them.

"They say the Government's policies only benefitted a handful of people and not all Malaysians. Although this is not true, the people may eventually believe it if they are not told the right situation," he said.

He said if the ministry failed to do this, it would not only affect its credibility but that of the Government too.

Dr Mahathir was speaking to Information Ministry staff at Angkasapuri.

Citing examples, Dr Mahathir said when the Government introduced the New Economic Policy in 1970, some quarters said it would only benefit a few.

"So many interpretations and versions were told to the people. But our intentions were to have an equal distribution of wealth among all Malaysians and to reduce poverty.

"Although the NEP had been very successful in meeting its objectives, some still went on to say that the NEP was unfair," he said.

Dr Mahathir said by using its network, the Information Ministry can show the people the fruits of the NEP which had benefitted millions of Malaysians and not a handful who were allegedly close to the Government.

Citing examples, he said many Bumiputera students who were able to pursue their tertiary education both here and abroad eventually became professionals holding important positions.

"We have distributed the country's wealth to seven million Malaysians by distributing RM50 billion worth of shares through Permodalan Nasional Berhad (under its schemes)," he said, adding that they were also given licences and permits to do business.

Dr Mahathir said it was important for Information officials to explain issues to the people because they may need time to grasp policies and issues announced by the Government.

"Some things may happen before their very eyes but they may not understand them...sometimes they need someone else to explain these issues to them thoroughly.

"We also need to report all aspects of our nation in a balanced manner by giving attention to problems as well as successes. This way, the people will get to know what is really happening," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the fact that the country's three largest communities and more than 100 ethnic groups had lived in peace since the NEP was launched was testimony to its success.

"Generally, all Malaysians have benefitted one way or another. We did not take something that belonged to the non-Bumiputera and gave it to the Bumiputera or vice-versa.

"All we wanted was to have equality among Malaysians," he said.

Citing examples, Dr Mahathir said although the Federal Constitution said that Islam was the country's official religion, other communities were

also accorded religious freedom.

Similarly, although Bahasa Malaysia was the official language, other languages were also allowed to be used and taught in schools.

He said if the Government did not get the co-operation of all Malaysians, its aim of transforming Malaysia into a developed country by 2020 would not materialise.

Ministry officials were also given an opportunity to have a dialogue with the Prime Minister.

To a question on how RTM could become more relevant since there were two private television stations, Dr Mahathir said although RTM had some important roles to play such as disseminating Government news, it could still become the premier television station.

He said the private stations probably had different approaches in representing programmes to attract viewers.

Dr Mahathir said the Government had to allow private stations to operate as it wanted to be more liberal and provide competition.

He said RTM could become number one as it had a huge budget allocation and experienced staff.

To another question on the future of the local film industry, Dr Mahathir said producers should try joining forces and internationalising their productions.

"In the United States, although they have only two or three studios, they produce movies with budgets running into millions of dollars.

"However in Malaysia, I was told we have so many studios owned by smaller companies. However, their average budget for a movie is only RM300,000. So how are you going to promote and market your movie?," he said.

He said at last count, there were 90 film production companies in Malaysia which produced a total of only between 15 and 20 movies per year.

Dr Mahathir was also told of problems faced by information officers who could not explain certain Government policies and issues as they themselves were kept in the dark or did not get the green light to do so.

"If there are issues you don't understand, refer it to a panel at the ministry.

"This way, you will be able to get whatever information you require and then explain it to the people," he said, adding that they should not attempt to explain issues which they themselves were ignorant of.