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Pre-empting violence (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - The use of the Internal Security Act to detain seven opposition politicians and activists was to prevent the "huge demonstration" scheduled for Saturday, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The Prime Minister said police had decided that prevention was better in the current situation.

"The police have decided that they are not going to deal with this huge demonstration on the so-called Black 14 of April.

"Such demonstrations invariably result in violence and they don't know what kind of damage will be done. And as the police statement says, they have evidence that there are plans to use explosives and the like.

"So we do not want that to happen before we take any action," Dr Mahathir told a Press conference after launching a dental amalgam filling called Silverfil at Technology Park Malaysia here.

Asked if the seven could have been arrested under other laws, Dr Mahathir said: "They could have been arrested under normal laws but normal laws require certain evidence and procedures and processes, which I suppose from the police point of view is not effective in preventing something from happening.

"If it is something that has happened, yes. But this is prevention."

On the evidence police had, he said that was for the police to decide.

"... but there have been instances when Molotov cocktails were made and tried before," Dr Mahathir said.

He added that it was up to the police to make more arrests.

The seven detained include Parti Keadilan Nasional Youth chief Mohamad Ezam Mohd Nor, vice-president Chua Tian Chang, supreme council member Saari Sungib, national Youth vice-chairman M. Gobalakrishnan and Youth exco member Abdul Ghani Harun.

The other two are reformasi activist Hishammudin Rais and director of the Free Anwar Campaign, Raja Petra Raja Kamaruddin.

Yesterday, Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Norian Mai said the seven were part of a group of about 20 reformasi activists in a secret cell which held 12 meetings between Jan 6 and April 4, with the objective of influencing the rakyat to participate in street demonstrations and to become violent when confronting the police.

One of the main aims of the group was to hold the massive gathering on Saturday when a memorandum would be submitted to the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (Suhakam).

Asked what would happen to the seven, Dr Mahathir said they could be held for 60 days under the ISA.

"If after 60 days they are found to be still threatening the security, (and) there is proof of threat to security, then they will be held for two years. If not, they will be released."

On the contention the arrests targeted the Opposition, he said it so happened that those arrested were in the Opposition.

"We expect legitimate opposition people to use the normal democratic procedures. But we don't think demonstrations and the use of violence constitute the democratic process," Dr Mahathir said.

Asked about Suhakam's call for the immediate release of the seven and its regret on the use of the ISA against them, the Prime Minister said the police and not Suhakam were responsible for the security of the country.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia gave priority to the human rights of the majority.

"Human rights of the majority to do business, to live in a stable condition without pressure or riots.

"That is also human rights.

"We cannot place priority on the human rights of a small group that has certain interests, that blocks the human rights of other people," he said.

Asked if the planned demonstrations and arrests showed the Government still needed the ISA, Dr Mahathir said the law was useful to prevent incidents from happening.

"If something has happened, if there is damage, maybe people have been killed and the like, then at that time, it is of no use.

"For people who have been injured, killed and cannot do business, any action will be too late," he said.

On how the arrests would affect Malaysia's international image, Dr Mahathir said: "Well, the usual thing. The foreign media will bash us up. They have never said anything good about us even if you are very nice.

"So we have a duty to our people, our country."