

25/09/2001

PM: We will deal with citizens suspected of terrorism

Sarban Singh; Sharanjit Singh

KUCHING, Mon. - Malaysia will not hand over its citizens involved in terrorist activities at home to the United States as the country had its own laws to deal with them, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

However, the Prime Minister said foreigners who committed crimes abroad but arrested in Malaysia would be extradited to the country where the offence was committed.

This, he said, would be done upon request by the country concerned.

Dr Mahathir said he was saddened by the US' move to brand Malaysia as one of the countries which harboured terrorists, adding that he did not understand what they actually meant.

"We do have Malaysian citizens who have shown that they want to use arms and other means to topple the government but they are Malaysians and we don't hand over Malaysians to other people.

"We will deal with them as we have sufficient laws to do so."

He said this at a Press conference after meeting Barisan Nasional component parties in Sarawak and community leaders at the Merdeka Palace Hotel here.

Dr Mahathir said this when asked to comment on an AFP news report that Malaysia was among nine Arabic and Muslim countries being asked by the US to hand over several hundred people suspected of having terrorist links.

He said if there were foreigners who came to Malaysia and carried out any terrorist activities, they would be arrested and tried under Malaysian laws.

Asked whether he saw the move by the US asking Malaysia to hand over the terrorists as a threat, Dr Mahathir said:

"Well, it is not a threat to Malaysia but we feel rather disturbed that we are being forced to take sides."

Elaborating that Malaysia was against terrorism and that it would support the US in its fight against terrorism, the country was unwilling to support a war against people who may not be involved in terrorism.

"We cannot support something that will put innocent people at risk. But we will give them all the information that we have about terrorism if requested and we will support any action against terrorists but it must be action against terrorists," he said.

Asked whether the government would use the Internal Security Act against terrorists, Dr Mahathir said this had already been done.

He said these include Malaysian citizens found to be involved or were planning to topple the government using arms and those suspected of having exploded bombs and killing at least one person.

Asked whether Malaysia would lodge an official complaint to the US on the matter, Dr Mahathir said he has no plans to do so.

Speaking in Sibu earlier, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia would only hand over suspected terrorists to the Federal Bureau of Investigations if they have committed a crime in the US.

Asked if the FBI had made such a request, Dr Mahathir said he was unaware and only knew about the matter based on newspaper reports.

The Prime Minister said this to reporters after a meet-the-people session at Kampung Semop, Pulau Buit, near here.

He said there had been complaints against the Government previously after it took preventive measures to check on negative elements in the country.

"Last time they complained and questioned why we took action and detained people without bringing them to trial.

"But now others are also taking similar action," he added.

In his speech, Dr Mahathir said Malaysians should appreciate the peace and harmony enjoyed by the various races with different cultures and religions in the country.

He said unlike the situation in other places, the people in Malaysia could live and go about their business without fear.

"Because of the terrorist acts in the US, Muslims around the world are being targeted and some of them are afraid even to leave their homes.

"They fear being attacked ... the attackers do not distinguish their victims as even Sikhs who wear turbans were killed after being mistaken for Muslims," he said, adding at some places even mosques had been torched.

Dr Mahathir said all this happened because there was no racial tolerance among the people in such places.

"I pray this would not happen because many innocent people are going to end up as victims.

"I'm glad we in Malaysia are still able to live in peace and harmony with all races practising great tolerance among themselves," he said.

However, Dr Mahathir said there were was a small group of people who were unhappy with the peace and stability in the country and wanted to create chaos.

"But we have managed to handle the situation by arresting them.

"When we did this we were condemned for not giving freedom to our people.

"Today, those who condemned us are themselves forced to arrest and take tough action against people only suspected to be terrorists," he added.