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PM: We do care for ex-servicemen

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PUTRAJAYA, Mon. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today dispelled the notion that the Government was not concerned with the well-being of ex-servicemen.

The Prime Minister stressed that the Government appreciated the sacrifices of its retired security personnel and as such, would do its best to ensure they were not left in the lurch upon retirement.

"The Government had come up with programmes to help ex-servicemen. However, some of those programmes had not been as successful as hoped.

"It probably did not take off well because efforts put in by the authorities may have been ineffective or insufficient ... it could also probably be due to the inability of the ex-servicemen to adapt to civilian life," he said when addressing some 500 ex-servicemen at a gathering held at the Prime Minister's Department.

Ex-servicemen, he said, should change their mindset so that they can fit into civilian life after retirement.

Dr Mahathir said at times, ex-servicemen themselves did not put in enough efforts to be successful.

"For example, upon retirement, some are given taxi permits. But the moment they receive the permits, they sell them for a paltry sum," he said.

The Prime Minister also said due to the careless attitude of some Malays, they had been often compared to the more successful Chinese.

This, he said, was the scenario although the Malay community was two times bigger than the Chinese community, but still lagged behind in business, education and other fields.

Citing examples, Dr Mahathir said if 10 personnel in a platoon were to have different suggestions while under siege, they would probably end up dead.

Dr Mahathir said some ex-servicemen who needed only RM50,000 to start a business would ask for a RM100,000 bank loan.

"Some of the money will be used elsewhere even before the business starts. And if the business encounters problems, how are they going to service their bank loan?

"We need to correct ourselves. We cannot keep blaming others," he said.

Dr Mahathir said ex-servicemen should not be disheartened if they did not receive big pay packages upon retirement.

"I have to work from day to night. In the Kedah dialect, they say sampai nak mampuih. But my salary is three times lower than that of the Petronas president who takes orders from me," he said, drawing laughter from those present.

Later at a Press conference, Dr Mahathir was asked whether the Government was willing to consider a request from ex-servicemen that all of them, irrespective of their years of service, be given pensions.

"As this is the military structure, we are unable to do that. This is because they retire at 40 years whereas the retirement age for civil servants is 55," he said.

Servicemen who complete more than 21 years of service are given pensions while those who serve fewer years are only paid gratuity.

Dr Mahathir said what was more important was that these personnel be trained in new skills to enable them to venture into other fields.

He said the Government had tried to deploy some of them into suitable

occupations but some ex-servicemen were just not interested.

"But if they want to work, do business or learn new skills, we are willing to help them," he said.

Dr Mahathir was also asked to comment on another request from the ex-servicemen that the basic salary of RM400 for recruits be reviewed.

He said although the basic salary was low, the servicemen received several allowances compared to other civil servants.