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Show hatred for graft to eradicate it, says Dr Mahathir

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Society can play a big role in fighting corruption by demonstrating strong abhorrence towards it, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

He said the feeling of shame was the most effective weapon against corruption, alongside noble values like religious faith cherished by the community.

Laws, he added, could only have a limited effect if society did not view bribery with abhorrence.

"Nothing is worse than the opinion that since corruption could not be eradicated, it should be accepted. If this is society's view, corruption will grow until it becomes a culture associated with our race.

"Everyone will become involved without shame, whether as givers or takers," he said at a conference on "Integrity in Business: The Way Forward."

The conference was organised by the Anti-Corruption Agency, International Trade and Industry Ministry and Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Ministry.

Participants included representatives from the ministries, private companies and chambers of commerce.

He said it might be that some people considered bribes as "assistance to the needy" and thus, the practice need not be hidden and no one felt ashamed.

At this stage, he said, nothing could be done to fight corruption as everyone was involved and would "defend" the practice.

He said both the givers and takers must feel that their act was wrong and shameful, and the entire community and race must also feel ashamed because there were corrupt people amongst them.

"That is a punishment that is more effective than any punishment imposed by the authorities," he said.

Dr Mahathir said while enforcement activities were important and powers should be given to the authorities to investigate corruption, sometimes such powers were misused by enforcement personnel themselves to elicit bribes.

"Law enforcement, no matter how strong and stern, can never control every person," he said, adding that people also had to hold firm to religious values and ethical standards.

The Prime Minister said corruption in society could be divided into two stages: The first stage when it was still considered a crime and the second stage when it was considered a norm.

"If nothing is done to curb corruption at the first stage, it would soon move into the second stage."

At the second stage, bribes would have to be given for everything and the cost of living would rise.

He said there were many types of corruption, and even political parties could be "corrupt" if they made promises to voters in return for votes.

"Because of this, the voters may not choose the best candidate."

Speaking to reporters later, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia was still at the first stage of corruption because its people still consider it as shameful and thus, it was carried out "under the table".

It was not like some other countries, he said, where it was so bad that lorries were stopped every few kilometres and forced to pay some money.

On corruption in the private sector, he said it was not very high, otherwise companies would not be making good profits and operating efficiently.

During the dialogue earlier, Dr Mahathir was asked about Malaysia's efforts to "promote" its efforts to combat corruption as the message does not seem to be reaching the international community.

He agreed that Malaysia was not good at "public relations", but there were those who would never recognise its achievements as they were biased.

Some among the international community, he said, even considered the New Economic Policy to be a form of corruption because the Government gave opportunities to the Bumiputeras.

He said the privatisation policy was used to allow Malay businessmen to compete at the highest level, but this too was criticised as being corruption.

"But I do not care about such views ... we need to balance economic development among the races, and we will continue our efforts," he said.