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Straight talk in the press needed

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DEAR SIR,

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said weakness in the Printing Presses and Publications Act needs to be addressed to further curb the spread of lies in the high-technology information world. He said under the present set-up, many of the punishments provided under the laws "do not commensurate with the crime" committed. Even I may agree with him.

Under the reviewed laws, if it comes to that, it must also be included for newspapers to put the names of the spokesmen or sources of the news that appears in their publications, so that the people can gauge the truthfulness and the sincerity of the news stories.

An example of an unsubstantiated and sensationalised news story that appeared on one of the local, influential dailies' front page recently said: "ARMY LINK: Soldiers recruited to help reformasi activists, say police". The story, quoting an unnamed police officer, said the Special Branch had been monitoring the activities of the group since 1998, when it was formed soon after the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim as Deputy Prime Minister.

The "unnamed police officer" said this group wanted to topple the Government by using force, and among those recruited were security officers, an expert in explosives, silat masters, teachers and other influential people. Well, it makes good reading, keeps your adrenaline pumping. As I have said in the past, when inaccurate things have been printed usually the damage has been done.

The article insinuates that the strong fabric of the Armed Forces' integrity appears to be shredded, giving an impression that the security of the country is now compromised. And, such an inaccurate message is not good for the country's well-being, especially when the economy is starting to revive.

When malicious news report implicating a ministry is printed, any responsible minister cannot just sit back and take the insinuations lightly. In this case the minister must initiate some kind of action, especially when the integrity of the disciplined Armed Forces is being questioned.

Lately, there has been a spate of Armed Forces bashing, ranging from Armed Forces personnel not having adequate housing (allegedly some "500,000" are living in squalor or sub-standard housing) to ex-servicemen being neglected by the Government. Repeated clarifications by the Ministry of Defence over the disparaging reports have fallen on the deaf ears of the detractors.

Having said that and if the media laws were to be tightened, it should also include curbing "powerful" columnists from being personal and vindictive when writing about a subject. Impartiality is good journalism. One columnist caused great consternation, especially among Umno leaders and supporters, when he liberally chastised and denigrated a certain politician, whom he referred to as "YB Zig Zag".

After scrutinising and analysing the mystery of YB Zig Zag, I am sure he is referring to more than one politician in Umno. Most of the time, I have concluded, he was referring to none other than Dr Mahathir.

Let us refer to his column that appeared on April 8, as a sample, in which he said: "YB Zig Zag is one of the estimated 60 per cent of Umno divisional leaders who have been returned unopposed... The private

findings of the diarist indicate that seven parliamentary constituencies in YB Zig Zag's state are under the "Pas effect", and YB Zig Zag's is the most vulnerable.

I have again concluded that the columnist is referring to Dr Mahathir. It is true that out of the 15 parliamentary constituencies in Dr Mahathir's home state, eight have gone to the opposition and only seven are left, and that could be read as "under the Pas effect".

Another sample: "Of late YB Zig Zag, like Mary Archer (wife of Jeffrey)... Has kept a low profile... Well if you want to get ahead politically, you may want to know him..." I don't think the columnist is referring to politicians such as Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin (an Umno vice-president), or Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak (another vice-president) or even Tun Daim Zainuddin (Finance Minister). He MUST be referring to Dr Mahathir, the way I see it! Who else! Oh! I can go on. What's the point!?

However one point is for sure, let us not create any more lingering dissatisfaction among the rakyat and Umno supporters as to who actually is this infamous YB Zig Zag. A chance for a column in such an influential daily newspaper should be put to good use, instead of engaging in literary verbosity and creating unnecessary anguish among Umno leaders.

This is especially so when the country is divided in so many ways, especially among the Malays. I just wish the columnist had the guts to call a spade a spade and name the politician whom he reviles and refers to as Zig Zag, and let the people decide if what he said is true. Then let us have some peace of mind.