

INFO ON DIRTY MONEY

STAR - 8 MAR 2002

By SA'ODAH ELIAS

KUALA LUMPUR: Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has called for changes to international banking laws to enable governments to scrutinise the foreign bank accounts of suspected corrupt politicians and officials, similar to that for suspected terrorists.

Governments should be allowed to look into the bank accounts of such people so that their ill-gotten money can be tracked," the Prime Minister said.

"If we can do that to accounts belonging to terrorists, why can't we do the same for money belonging to corrupt politicians or corrupt officials?" he asked during a dialogue at the Asia Economic Summit here.

Dr Mahathir said that "quite a big number" of countries, because their banking laws allowed for non-disclosure of banking transactions, had become havens for people who had accumulated wealth through illegal or unethical practices.

Such laws provided protection to these people to hide their ill-gotten wealth even from the governments that they had stolen from, he said. Calling for the outlawing of such banking practices in all countries, Dr

Mahathir suggested that those who refused to conform should be sanctioned.

The Prime Minister believed that in this way the illegal and corruptly-acquired money could be prevented from being deposited legally in some countries.

"As it is now, whenever we need to check on allegations of somebody having stashed money in some banks in some countries, we are told that there are banking laws that protect the privacy of these accounts."

"As a result many people get away with the money that they had obtained through illegal means. I believe we (the international community) could agree that there should be less of this kind of practices," he added.

On the question of financing of political parties, Dr Mahathir said that while transparency was good, the expectation that there should be absolute transparency in the running of a political party was unrealistic.

"The democratic system requires that politicians must do certain things so that they will become better known. They have to meet people, have to be nice to people - and all this costs money.

"In fact, this is practised

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**Be realistic
with
demands,
says Dr M**

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even in the West. I have yet to find one single country where politicians do not receive donations one way or another," he said.

He said such was the nature of politics that there were certain things that could not be disclosed to people.

"Let's be realistic. We can be transparent but there is a limit because there are always things that will inhibit us from doing so. Let's not be too critical about this, because most times, people who criticise about transparency are not so transparent themselves," he added.

Responding to questions of transparency in the government and democratic practices, Dr Mahathir said that developing countries should be allowed a reasonable time to adjust.

"Both ideas came from the West and they did not come overnight."

He said people in the West had had adequate time to adjust to the changes in the system so the impact was not so severe as to destroy society.

He said the West wanted to impose this advanced system on undeveloped countries, making it difficult for these countries and their people to adjust to the sudden changes.