

# Mahathir: I'm not responding to Amien's statement

By ZULKIFLI ABD RAHMAN and CLARENCE CHUA

PUTRAJAYA: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad refused to be drawn into an open discussion on the statement by Indonesia's national assembly chairman Amien Rais over the whipping penalty against illegal Indonesian immigrants found in the country.

"I won't respond to such things. We don't conduct relations with other countries like that," he said after taking a boat ride around the Putrajaya Lake.

However, he said what Malaysia was doing was similar to what had been done by

STAR 21 AUG 2002

Singapore, adding that Malaysia learnt from Singapore how to handle illegal immigration cases.

"Actually Singapore also got the same thing (whipping against illegals). But I don't see anyone complaining," he said, adding that he would not have tried to meddle in the affairs of another country.

Dr Mahathir said this yesterday when asked to comment on the statement made by Amien who slammed Malaysia over what he called the "inhumane" caning of several illegal Indonesian migrant workers.

Amien was reported to have said he was "disappointed, angry and cannot accept that Malaysia, a modern country

which is of the same root as us, has a way to punish Indonesian illegal migrant workers that is inhumane."

Amien had reportedly warned Malaysia that it was "playing with fire" for caning illegal Indonesian workers and urged the Indonesian government to tell Dr Mahathir to "stop playing games."

On the lake here, Dr Mahathir said he hoped that it would be utilised for water-related recreational activities.

He said many foreign dignitaries who saw the lake, told him that they were surprised that it was a man-made lake.

"We are hoping that the public can take boat rides and enjoy water sports.

"Plans are also under way to create artificial beaches so that the people can enjoy swimming," he added.

The 570ha lake is created through a process called inundation where a water source was diverted from Sungai Chua and used to flood the man-made lake.

A unique point about the lake is that the water quality is of high standard that allows the growth of oxygen-giving phytoplankton.

In Kuala Lumpur, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar criticised Amien for his alleged threats against Malaysia, saying it was the country's sovereign right to use caning as a deterrent sentence for illegal workers.

"That punishment (caning) was meant to be a deterrent and we hope that it will make people think twice before entering this country illegally.

"Let us avoid emotions and talk with responsibility and accountability. Is Amien Rais saying that it is right for Indonesians to come here illegally?"

"I am sure as a member of the legislature he will not encourage his citizens to illegally enter another country which is a sovereign and independent state," he told reporters after meeting Ukrainian First Vice-Prime Minister Oleg Dubyna here.

Syed Hamid said Malaysia had taken a very humane and compassionate step by giving

illegal workers ample time for them to leave at the country's expense.

"They (illegal workers) have no fixed employment and because of that it can destabilise our country. Without jobs they can be involved in all sorts of activities while on the other hand, they can be easy targets for exploitation.

"Every action taken was in consultation with the Indonesian government through the embassy here and through Dr Mahathir's visit to Indonesia recently," he said.

On the "purported" failure to meet Myanmar's opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, Syed Hamid said Dr Mahathir was on a working visit.