

# ***PM: Nations must decide what human rights mean***

By JACQUELINE ANN SURIN

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia must be fearless to determine what human rights means for itself and not feel compelled to follow everything in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

"Some countries preach lofty tenets of rights while at the same time they are at liberty unilaterally to declare war on others without even having to abide by the very standards of international law," he said.

"The right of might has surfaced in place of the right to deliberate via accepted international norms. We must thus be unafraid to say what is right for human rights in our own country," Dr Mahathir said yesterday at the opening of Suhakam's two-day Conference on Human Rights and Education at the Putra World Trade Centre.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim read his speech.

Dr Mahathir said while the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights served as a benchmark, there could never be an absolute consensus on the meaning of these rights, adding that the practices of some of these rights have to take the religious and cultural practices of a nation into consideration."

He said these rights must always be seen in the larger context of the quality of life for the community.

For example, he said, the Internal Security Act (ISA), which allows for detention without trial and which has been heavily criticised by the West, was "necessary to safeguard the nation's security and protection for the vast majority."

"Proponents of human rights insist on the indivisibility of human rights. Show me a country that is able to sustain an adequate stan-

**STAR 10 SEP 2002**

dard of living without maintaining law and order," Dr Mahathir said.

He said Malaysia did not have to be apologetic about upholding the rule of law to maintain security, law and order, adding that among Asean countries, Malaysia was the third to institute a National Human Rights Commission.

"Only last week the authorities lost their case in the pursuit of security implementation under the Internal Security Act when the highest court in the land decided to decide for the detainees on grounds which only the deciding Federal Court judges deem justifiable," he said.

In a landmark decision, the Federal Court last week ruled that the police had unlawfully detained Mohd Ezam Mohd Noor and four other Parti Keadilan Nasional activists under the ISA last year.

The ruling said the police had acted in *mala fide* for detaining the men because of their political beliefs and not because they were a threat to national security as required by Section 73(1) of the ISA.

Dr Mahathir said the ruling spoke volumes in deflecting criticisms that had been levelled at the judiciary.

Suhakam chairman Tan Sri Abu Talib Othman said because of modern technology and the free flow of information, it was time for the Government to review restrictive laws in the country and to pass new laws that reflect changing circumstances, and "to prevent abuse of power in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

Later at a press conference, Abu Talib said last week's Federal Court decision boded well for human rights protection in the country, adding it was a lesson to the authorities to do the right thing.