

PM: US immigration officers rough and rude

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KUALA LUMPUR: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said US immigration officers were rude and rough towards him while he was in New York recently.

Describing such behaviour as "anti-Muslim hysteria", he said US security authorities were obviously

not thinking rationally, even when dealing with foreign dignitaries.

"When I arrived in New York on the way to Washington, an officer who boarded the jet said in a rough manner that nobody should move until we were all checked.

"It was not necessary. If they had wanted to check they could have done so. There was no need to be so *keras* (rough)," he told

reporters after opening the International Convention on Biotechnology at PWTC here yesterday.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi made a similar disclosure on Monday when he said he was subjected to stringent checks and asked to remove his shoes and belt at the Los Angeles International Airport, before he was allowed to fly to New

York to address the United Nations.

Commenting on the new measures taken by the US to tighten entry and exit requirements for foreigners as part of its anti-terror efforts, Dr Mahathir said it was unfortunate the acts of a few people had resulted in the whole Muslim world being labelled negatively.

"It's their country, so I don't know what we can do about it. Of course I'm upset. I'm not a thief, I'm not a terrorist," he said.

He said the Government would not follow the tightened immigration measures adopted by the US and Canadian governments.

"People (from US and Canada) know Malaysia is a safe place. It is

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probably even safer than their own countries," he said.

"Terrorist attacks, whether by crashing into buildings until they topple or by spreading anthrax, are in their countries. It's all done there, so it's dangerous there. There's no danger in Malaysia," he added.

The US has introduced a new entry-exit system that includes registration, fingerprinting and photographing of foreigners entering and leaving the country.

Abdullah said Malaysians should decide whether they wanted to put up with the hassles of travelling to the US, reports **SHAHANAAZ HABBIB**.

The Deputy Prime Minister said Malaysia did not like being lumped in a group that the US perceived as terrorist countries.

"We think it is not proper for the US to go to such lengths but they did think it is right because they are afraid

of the danger to their country.

"The perception of threat is very difficult to get off their minds. The experience of Sept 11 is haunting them," he said.

Abdullah said he did the best he could to get the US to agree to speed up visa approvals for Malaysians.

"I was given a promise that they will reduce the period necessary for the visa to be issued. But now they have come up with something else," he said after launching the National Land Convention here yesterday.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar also said he was subjected to strict checks when he was with Abdullah at the Los Angeles International Airport for departure to New York on Sept 15.

He said this showed that that the US continued to be gripped by fear following the Sept 11 incident.

"Everyone was checked, I was the first, they (airport officials) asked us to take off our shoes and we could not do

anything," he told reporters after opening the Kuala Lumpur world poetry recital here last night.

Syed Hamid said he regretted the move as the US had acted without taking into consideration the individual's status.

The DAP said the US Government owed Abdullah and Malaysians an apology for its disrespectful treatment of the Deputy Prime Minister.

Calling it "shocking", DAP publicity secretary Ronnie Liu said it was very wrong for the US immigration officers to ask

the No 2 man in Malaysia to take off his belt and shoes for security reasons.

He said the US should observe some protocol as Abdullah held a diplomatic passport and, more importantly, was a representative of the Malaysian Government.