

PM: Region must be vigilant against terrorists

By SA'ODAH ELIAS

PETALING JAYA: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said countries in the South-East Asian region need to be always vigilant against the threat of terrorist.

He said that while the problem in the region was currently manageable, governments could not afford to be lax.

"The problem has not become serious yet. But if we lax and don't take certain measures I am sure it will become a serious threat, especially to Malaysia and Indonesia," he said in an interview in the CNN's Q&A programme in Washington.

Dr Mahathir dismissed suggestion that Indonesia's unwillingness to contain the problem of terrorism was a source of frustration in the region.

He said Indonesia had always been very co-operative with Malaysia in tackling the problem, especially in the exchange of information regarding terrorist suspects.

"I am not frustrated with Indonesia or Philippines at all. Of course they have their own situation to handle and they cannot handle theirs the same way as we did ours," he said.

On suggestion that the success of his trip to Washington this time around hinged on Malaysia's action against domestic terrorist suspects following Sept 11 attacks after being shunned by the United States' government since the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in 1998, Dr Mahathir said:

"We had taken action against suspected terrorists long before the Sept 11 attacks. But

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when Sept 11 came, suddenly what we were doing became relevant to what was happening in other parts of the world.

"We were able to give some information on what was happening within groups in Malaysia that have links with cells elsewhere," he added.

He also said that the world's perception of Malaysia has changed and people were beginning to understand why the government had to be vigilant in ensuring that the country remained stable and peaceful.

In the 30-minute interview, Dr Mahathir was asked various questions, with topics ranging from the outcome of his visit to the expected questions of Internal Security Act, judiciary, alleged Press gag and Anwar.

Replying to barrages of questions on the ISA, Dr Mahathir said that others needed to understand that it was a preventive law and that it was not one that was introduced by him.

The law, he said, had been there long before he became the prime minister.

"No, I never use the law against my political opponents," he said when it was suggested that he had used the ISA

to ensure that he remained in power.

Dr Mahathir said that those arrested under ISA were those who posed threats to the peace and stability of the country and they were arrested so that they could be rehabilitated.

On the suggestion that many of those arrested were innocent of any crime, Dr Mahathir said, while in detention many of them boasted about their plans to overthrow the government, sometime through violence.

He said the Barisan Nasional government did not need to use the ISA to remain in power and the fact that two state governments were ruled by the opposition was proof that democracy was very much alive in Malaysia.

"I have a responsibility for the country.. to protect the interest of the country," he stressed.

Replying to claims that the government had been cruel in not allowing Anwar to seek treatment overseas although he was critically ill following the recent hunger strike, Dr Mahathir said: "More than a year ago there was a foreign doctor said that unless Anwar was taken out of the country for treatment he would die. It has been more than a year and he is still walking."