

05 JAN 2002

Mahathir-Terrorists

DO NOT BLAME M'SIA FOR SEPT 11 ATTACKS, SAYS DR MAHATHIR

PUTRAJAYA, Jan 5 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Malaysia should not be made to share blame for the Sept 11 attacks on the United States for not detaining two of the suspected terrorists involved when they were reportedly seen in Kuala Lumpur.

The Prime Minister told reporters who approached him at the Foreign Ministry's Aidilfitri open house at Wisma Putra here today that the duo had the entered Malaysia as ordinary tourists.

"How are we to know that they are terrorists. Are you saying that had Boeing not made aeroplanes or that had pilots not fallen ill with stomach ache and were unable to fly the planes, there would be no Sept 11 attacks," he said.

Dr Mahathir was responding to questions on Singapore's Malay-language newspaper Berita Harian's report, quoting Jane's Intelligence Review, that the Sept 11 attacks could have been avoided had Malaysia intercepted and arrested the suspected terrorists while they were in the country.

In the Sept 11 attacks, terrorists used hijacked commercial jetliners to plough into the twin towers of New York's World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in Washington, killing more than 3,000 people.

Two of the men suspected to be involved in the Sept 11 attacks namely Khalid al-Mihdhar and Nawaf Al-Hazmi were traced to have visited Malaysia from Jan 5 to Jan 8 last year.

Dr Mahathir said such report appeared to be purposely intended to create problem with Malaysia, stressing that "we too can hurl allegations like that."

"When a person comes here as a tourist, are we going to ask him +are you a terrorist+...obviously he would say no.

"When people come here we regard them as tourists. Only when we have proof that they are indeed terrorists, the we shall have them arrested," the prime minister said.

Asked whether terrorists were using Malaysia as their base, Dr Mahathir said that Malaysia or any other country for that matter could be vulnerable to such a possibility.

"We do not know and cannot recognise these people, just like the time when we fought against communist insurgents who were traders or hawkers during the day but were terrorists at night," he said.

On the arrest of 13 members of a new cell of the so-called Kumpulan Militan Malaysia (KMM), Dr Mahathir said the government would continue to track down these militants although they have not struck terror in Malaysia yet.

He said the government was aware that an Indonesian militant group with links to the KMM was behind a spate of bombings in the republic.

The possibility of the KMM mounting similar bomb attacks in Malaysia could not be discounted and as such, must be checked, Dr Mahathir said.

The Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Norian Mai yesterday announced the the arrest of the 13 KMM members, including a university lecturer, during a police operation mounted between Dec 9 and Thursday.

-- BERNAMA

AKT AZZ RYN