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Mahathir-Australia

DR M SAYS AUSTRALIA WON'T BE ABLE TO CHANGE ITS WAYS

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 26 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today that Australia may be welcomed in Asia provided it is willing to change its ways but expresses pessimism that Australia is able to do that.

"If it chooses to become a truly Asian country and stop giving advice to everybody, assuming that it knows better about other countries than they know about themselves, I think we will welcome them," he said.

However, Dr Mahathir said that it would be a big change for Australia.

"I don't think they can achieve it," he told a news conference at the Royal Malaysian Air Force base in Subang near here on his return from a visit to France.

The prime minister was responding to questions surrounding the latest tiff between the two countries arising from an interview he gave to an Australian newspaper in which he said Australia "has gone too far" in identifying itself with the United States' aims and tactics in the war against terror.

Dr Mahathir was also quoted as saying that "Australia has to choose whether it is an Asian country or a Western country."

An Australian opposition Labour Party foreign affairs spokesman, Kevin Rudd, reportedly criticized Dr Mahathir over his remarks.

Queried on this matter, the prime minister said Australians should in the first place stop making comments about Malaysia.

"We say less things about Australia than Australians say about us, calling me a dictator, authoritarian government.

"I am the first authoritarian government elected to become a dictator and then resigning as a dictator. So this is the first dictator in the world who has resigned while still quite healthy," he said sarcastically.

Asked whether other Asian countries share his views about Australia, Dr Mahathir said that he was not concerned about the opinions of other Asian nations.

"It's Malaysia that is my responsibility...I don't impose my views on other countries," he said.

The prime minister said that Australia certainly was not doing anything to improve bilateral relations, perhaps referring to travel alerts issued by Canberra advising Australians on possible terrorist threats in South-East Asia.

He said: "After all, Australia is not a safe place (either). The Japanese feel that it is unsafe. They (Japan) have also put out an advisory for the Japanese not to visit Australia. So the pot should not call the kettle black."

Dr Mahathir was also asked to comment on reports that Singaporean tour agencies were using Malaysian tourism products to boost the number of tourists to the island republic.

The prime minister responded in jest that this perhaps showed that Singapore had nothing to offer apart from "buildings made from concrete".

"They have nothing, what can they do. Have a little pity on them," he said.

When pointed out that the Malaysian tourism industry would not gain much from this, especially the one-day tour packages to this country offered by such agencies, Dr Mahathir said: "Never mind. Give a little bit to them."

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