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WEF-Journalists

JOURNALISTS DENIED ACCESS TO MAIN CENTRE OF ACTION AT WEF

By: Salmy Hashim

NEW YORK, Feb 4 (Bernama) -- Many journalists issued "orange" badges at the World Economic Forum (WEF) are frustrated that they are totally denied access to the main centre of action at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel here.

The orange badged journalists are confined to the media centre at the Intercontinental Hotel across the street - huddled in front of the big screen while straining to listen to speakers amidst the background chat of other journalists and the clickity-clack of those at their laptops.

Malaysian journalists travelling with the prime minister, whose companies had paid thousands of dollars to cover hotels, airfares and miscellaneous expenditure, could not gain access to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad the whole day on Sunday although he spoke at three occasions at the Waldorf.

Photographers are banned altogether from the Waldorf and supplied photographs selected by the forum organisers.

Malaysian tv crew with purple badges (technical crew) were denied access for "photo ops" (photo opportunities) of the prime minister speaking on capital flows at a workshop and during a special session on Islam.

Print and tv media also missed the lively discussions and question-and-answer session following the Dr Mahathir's provocative presentation on capital flows, but saw a direct telecast of the prime minister's session on "Islam in a Modern State" from across the street.

A Malaysian tv reporter thought that the trip to cover the forum would have been a waste of time and money had the Prime Minister's programme been limited to events at the forum.

Fortunately, Dr Mahathir's three-day programme in New York include visits to Ground Zero, the site of the former World Trade Center, followed by a visit to two technology centres outside New York city on Monday and Tuesday.

Some journalists described the conference as a "caste system" put into place by the Swiss-based organisation that has undermined coverage of the five-day event. Not a few journalists have decided to pack up their bags and go home without covering the meeting.

Others say that corporate executives are only too glad to keep out annoying journalists -- ironically in New York city, the media capital of the world.

Charles McLean, spokesman of the conference, was reported to have said that with 3,000 delegates in the Waldorf, it was not possible to accommodate everyone.

He said that was why press conferences were held in another hotel for the huge numbers of the world's press without access.

It turned out, however, that press conferences are held during live broadcast of workshop sessions, keeping journalists away from them unless they are big names like celebrity singer Bono or Microsoft chief Bill Gates.

McLean said that in Davos, Switzerland, where the forum had been held over the past 30 years, it was possible to accommodate journalists, but it was not possible to do so in New York.

So much for free press in a country that promotes press freedom. The WEF organisers seem to live in another sphere in their "vision for a shared future" (the theme of their conference this year). They risk being shunned by the press at their next meeting, wherever that may be, next year.

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