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LID-Media
LEADERS ATTENDING LID GRILL THE MEDIA

By: Ahmad Fuad Yahya & S. Retnanathan

LANGKAWI, Aug 2 (Bernama) -- Heads of government attending the Global 2002 Langkawi International Dialogue (LID) today turned the spotlight on media representatives when they were questioned on biased reporting, inaccurate reports and lack of trust among media practitioners in the South.

The session was of a different sort when the leaders were presented with a rare opportunity to question top media officials on their work ethics.

It began with Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad firing the first salvo when he wanted to know why the press always reported negative news in any country.

"I'm going to enjoy this (questioning the media representatives). I want to know why the press is always negative in reporting about any country. I can't imagine that these countries have not achieved anything at all but even if they had, why aren't we hearing about the good and their achievements. I want to know why," he questioned.

Robert Kabushenga, corporation secretary of New Vision, Uganda's leading newspaper, said in response that it was correct to say that the media placed emphasis on things perceived to be negative but these negative news were written with hope that the authorities would address the issues raised.

The media had also at the same time been publishing positive news but more often than not they turned out to be less noticed by the readers than the negative ones, he added.

Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe had also asked whether reporters were free to write about their opinions on any issue or were they guided by the do's and don'ts from media owners.

To this, a former media practitioner from Britain said reports should be distinguished whether they were news reports or analysis but there was an obligation for newsmen to explain their reports.

"There are two dimensions to a report, there are two sides to a story and it is important that journalists play a balancing role in reporting," he said.

However, he thought that media barons did not play a role in deciding on what should be published and what should not as this was in the hands of the practitioners themselves.

Replying to a question, Malaysian National News Agency (Bernama) General Manager Syed Jamil Syed Jaafar said there had been times when the government was not happy with reports by the agency and the same applied to the opposition parties.

"So I guess we're on the right track. It is the role of the media to play a watchdog role but sometimes some media become mad dogs," he said.

Syed Jamil said some newspapers sensationalised news to boost sales while some had the money to pay in the event of a defamation suit against them.

In response to a question on why media practitioners tended to choose the news they printed, The Star's editor-in-chief, Datuk Ng Poh Tip, said because there were times when the media felt that things were wrong and needed to be made right.

"Then we can trace the source of the problems and put things right. We do feature successful policy stories... we do print happy stories (positive

news)," she added.

Dr Mahathir wound up the session by asking why journalists from the South did not trust each other as reports originating from these countries were not picked up and used by South nations.

"Why do they go for news released by other foreign news agencies? For example, if something happens in Malaysia, why do we take the news from the foreign agencies instead of getting the news from the host country?" he asked.

To this, New Straits Times editor-at-large Hardev Kaur said there had been efforts in the past to obtain first hand information but all the efforts had yet to take off.

She said the latest effort was the Smart News Network International (SNNi), which was born from the last smart partnership dialogue in Uganda last year.

In adding to Hardev's comments, NST group editor Datuk Ahmad Talib told the leaders that foreign wire agencies were faster in delivering news and it was convenient for media practitioners to pick up news from them.

He said the SNNi was a good start but media practitioners needed to eliminate the element of mistrust among them in the South countries.

To this reply, Dr Mahathir retorted, "So you trust them (foreign wire services). Are you saying Reuters (a foreign wire agency) provides news which is correct?"

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