

28 MAR 2002

Dr Mahathir-Arafat

M'SIA CONDEMNS ISRAEL'S EFFORT TO UNDERMINE ARAFAT

SHAH ALAM, March 28 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today criticised any effort by Israel to undermine the authority of Palestinian President Yasser Arafat whom it claims to be responsible for the suicide attacks in the West Bank.

He said: "We regret the idea of undermining Arafat. (If) you do, then he cannot control his people who will go around blasting themselves inside Israeli supermarkets."

"How do you expect him to control (his people) when you do not even recognise or respect his authority," the prime minister told reporters after launching cranes made by Fevelle Favco Cranes (M) Sdn Bhd, here.

He was asked to comment on the increasing violence in the West Bank where in the latest attack, a suicide bomber killed 16 Israelis and wounded 140 others in a hotel restaurant in Netanya yesterday.

The Islamic group, Hamas, has claimed responsibility for the attack but Israel blames Arafat for not fully using his authority to act against the militants.

Arafat had decided to skip this week's Arab Summit in Beirut rather than submit to the Israeli terms, which did not guarantee he would be allowed to return home.

Dr Mahathir said: "Never has a head of government been prevented from leaving his country."

Meanwhile, Dr Mahathir was also asked to comment on the dispute in the MCA over the eligibility of 261 new branches to take part in party polls.

"We have to see why they (the 261 branches) cannot participate," he said.

The prime minister added, however, that the matter was best resolved by MCA itself.

He said the internal problems of any political party should ideally be resolved by the party itself, not the government or court.

The MCA election steering committee has rejected MCA youth chief Datuk Ong Tee Kiat's claims that the 261 party branches cannot take part in elections on the ground that they were set up only this year.

Committee chairman Datuk Seri Dr Ting Chew Peh said yesterday that all the new branches were properly constituted and approved by the MCA central committee before Dec 31 last year.

-- BERNAMA

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