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PM: We acted fast against terrorists

Deborah Loh; Zulita Mustafa

PUTRAJAYA, Thurs. - Malaysia has always been alert to the presence of terrorists on its soil and has acted ahead of other countries in preventing attacks, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

He said the Government had known from early on about the intentions of certain groups to create unrest and had acted swiftly in containing them.

"Yes, we knew about them much earlier. Long before Sept 11 (2001), we had already taken action against them.

"We are way ahead of the rest of the world in terms of dealing with potential terrorists."

Dr Mahathir said this at the Putrajaya Lake Club where he earlier witnessed the signing of an agreement on the production of Inokom Atos cars locally.

The Prime Minister was asked about recent findings from investigations into the Bali bombings, that some of the suspects had enrolled in a religious school in Ulu Tiram, Johor, in the early 1990s.

On the recent arrests of three alleged suicide bombers with links to Kumpulan Militan Malaysia, Dr Mahathir said the police had always known of their presence, but had chosen to act only recently.

"I think the police decided to pick them up later. It would be a cause for concern if we didn't know where they were at all."

Dr Mahathir also said he was not surprised about the existence of potential terrorists in the country.

"We discovered very much early that there were such people. From the information we got, we know there are a number of them around."

He described them as "misguided" people who rejected democracy for violence in order to gain power.

"So they went to Pakistan and Afghanistan to learn about using force to take over the Government.

"They came back here but they are not well prepared for this sort of thing and very soon, we detected them. They are not going to be a threat to this country."

He said the Government was also regulating the operations of religious schools because it was found that not all of them were teaching religion.

"Yes, we are regulating them ... because they are teaching something else."

On the possible expulsion of two MCA State Assemblymen in Penang - Lim Boo Chang (Datuk Keramat) and Tan Cheng Liang (Jawi) - Dr Mahathir said it was up to the MCA.

"At the moment, I leave it to the MCA to make a decision. But if they want to refer it to the Barisan Nasional, then we'll be prepared to study the case."

Lim and Tan had abstained from voting in the State Assembly on an Opposition motion against the construction of the Penang Outer Ring Road.

Later, speaking at the breaking of fast function hosted by the Foreign Ministry at Wisma Putra, Dr Mahathir said Muslims and non-Muslims must tackle terrorism or risk living in continued fear, hatred and anger.

He said such an environment would make people fearful of travelling or doing other things and this would affect the economy.

"I hope that someone among us and among them will think rationally to find solutions to the problem," said Dr Mahathir.

Also present at the event were his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and members of the foreign diplomatic corps.

Dr Mahathir said it was necessary to stop the oppression of Muslims in Palestine and other countries, otherwise there was a possibility that there would be no end to acts of terror.

Citing an example of the feud between Palestinians and Israelis, Dr Mahathir said that among the 1.3 billion Muslims around the world, there might be a thousand of them who felt angry and frustrated, and would act on their own.

He also said there was no use for them to speak about things like human rights and freedom of speech if the so-called democratic countries would not stop committing undemocratic acts.