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PM questions news report (HL)

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PUTRAJAYA, Sat. - The Prime Minister today questioned the wisdom of a news report in the Singapore Berita Harian which claimed that Malaysia could have prevented the Sept 11 attacks in the US if it had arrested two of the terrorists here.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said it was wrong to assume that the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon would not have taken place if the terrorists, who entered Malaysia as tourists, were arrested.

He said those who made such allegations were only trying to "find trouble with others".

"Does it mean that if Boeing hadn't made those planes then the (Sept 11) incident wouldn't have happened?"

"Does it mean that if the pilot who flew the plane that day had a stomach-ache, then it wouldn't have happened?"

"How can they know? How can they assume? We can also make certain allegations if we wanted to," he said.

Dr Mahathir was asked about Thursday's report which said the Sept 11 attacks could have been prevented had Malaysian police arrested two men - Khalid Al-Midhar and Nawaf Al-Azmi - who were in Malaysia from Aug 5 to Aug 8, 2000. The paper had quoted Jane's Intelligence Review, a defence and intelligence magazine.

Khalid and Nawaf were alleged to have flown a plane which slammed into the Pentagon building.

Yesterday, Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Norian Mai described the report as "baseless". He said the two men were not arrested as they were here as tourists. Norian said the information on their movements, activities, photographs, passports and other details were handed over to the US authorities.

Dr Mahathir, who was speaking at Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar's Hari Raya open house, said no action could be taken against tourists unless there was proof or information that they were terrorists.

"Are we going to ask them if there are terrorists and do we expect them to say, yes, we are? Of course not."

Syed Hamid later told reporters there was no need to review policies on issuing tourist visas.

"We want to encourage visitors to come here. So long as we have no record of the criminal background, there is no need for us to review (visa policies).

"But if we do have information that they are here to create trouble then we will act against them and prevent them from coming here."

Dr Mahathir said the police would continue to hunt down remaining members of the Kumpulan Militan Malaysia.

"If they can explode bombs in Indonesia, then they can do that here."

On the recent arrests of 13 people under the Internal Security Act for their involvement in the KMM, Dr Mahathir said the police must have had enough proof to have acted.

Asked if the arrests would tarnish Malaysia's image, he said: "No. Instead, it shows we are firm.

"If we say we promise to act against terrorists, we do, whether they are our own people or foreigners."

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