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Dr M hits out at those tarnishing our image

PUTRAJAYA, Fri. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today hit out at certain quarters abroad who were tarnishing the good image of Malaysia when the nation itself had done nothing against them.

"Malaysia is a safe and peaceful country. But we are not denying that there were terrorists here and we took action against them before any other country did anything about it. We detained and imprisoned the terrorists.

"For that, they said we were not democratic. Now they understand our initial intention. We took pre-emptive action to detain them.

"Otherwise, there would have been a bomb explosion and many people would have died. It would have been too late," the Prime Minister said at his Hari Raya open house at Seri Perdana here.

He was commenting on a complaint by two Malaysian students studying at a university in Australia who had been advised by their university's international students affairs department not to return here as they claimed the situation here was tense.

It is learnt that the students, who had come earlier for the open house, had conveyed their complaint to Dr Mahathir and Dr Siti Hasmah.

"I do not know what their intention is but we are on the losing end," Dr Mahathir said.

Meanwhile, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said that Australian Prime Minister John Howard's refusal to apologise for his statement on the possibility of pre-emptive strikes against terrorists in Asian countries was proof of his arrogance.

"This is because he is aware that people are enraged and uncomfortable (with his comments) but he is still stubbornly persistent," he said at his open house at Putra World Trade Centre.

He urged Howard to focus on co-operating with Asian countries for their common good.

"If he has reports that the safety of Australians is at risk, we can assist them as well since our security forces are quite competent," he said.

Howard's comments came under fire from Asian leaders including Dr Mahathir who had stated that any such move by the Australians would tantamount to a declaration of war.