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Mahathir-Huhtala

M'SIA WILL SPEAK OUT WITHOUT FEAR OR FAVOUR, SAYS MAHATHIR

KUALA LUMPUR, May 29 (Bernama) -- Malaysia will continue to voice its opinion without fear or favour despite some countries taking exception to its outspokenness, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The Prime Minister said: "We will speak the truth. We have to say what we believe is true."

Dr Mahathir said this when asked to comment on remarks by United States ambassador to Malaysia Marie Huhtala that ties between South-East Asian countries would go downhill unless its leaders "curb their sometimes offensive" criticism of Washington's foreign policy.

The US envoy's comments, contained in a speech made at a business forum last Friday and released on the embassy's website yesterday, however did not single out Malaysia or Dr Mahathir.

She was quoted as saying that these comments by the leaders were not helpful by any standard and that they were bound to have a harmful effect on the relationship.

Huhtala also called for relations to be restored to the warm levels of a year ago.

Malaysia has been outspoken against America's foreign policies especially on its unilateral invasion of Iraq in March this year.

Asked to comment further on a possible backlash by Washington which could probably affect US-Malaysia trade ties due to Malaysia's strong stand on the US-led invasion on Iraq, Dr Mahathir said: "I believe the US subscribes to the freedom of speech, which means sometimes you hear opinions which you like and at other times, you hear opinions which you don't like."

This also applies to Malaysia, whereby it has been criticised by other people and the criticism was very unfair, but "we accepted it," he said after attending the Workers Day 2003 gathering for public sector employees at the National Institute of Public Administration (Intan) here.

"I don't know about a strong stand but we have always had that kind of stand that we will speak the truth, we will voice our opinion according to what we really think.

"We would not hide things because that will not do any service to anybody," he said.

Dr Mahathir's response comes a day before he leaves for Lausanne, Switzerland, to attend the broader informal dialogue to be held on June 1, on the eve of the summit of the Group of Eight (G8) developed countries in Evian, France.

The summit would also be attended by US President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The US and Britain, which led the invasion on Iraq, were criticised by the international community amid accusations the war was illegal and that the reason for the war -- that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction-- were baseless.

Both Saddam and the weapons of mass destruction have yet to be found.

Evian, famed for the manufacture of mineral water, is about an hour's drive from Lausanne.

Dr Mahathir said that US-Malaysia trade ties were "very good" and had not been affected by the critical views of the Malaysian government.

Nevertheless, he said that the US, Malaysia's largest trading partner, was not buying as many goods as before due its own economic problems.

"Of course, at the moment it is not able to buy as many things (as) possible, we understand that because they are now facing economic problems.

"Otherwise, the relationship with the business people is very good," he said.

To a question on the probability of Malaysia not being forthcoming or critical of international issues in the future, Dr Mahathir, who will step down in October, said: "You are mistaken about (Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah) Ahmad Badawi (as) he has got the same stand and you must remember that my stand is the result of the government's stand and that of the Cabinet."

Dr Mahathir stressed that he does not make his own stand, which sometimes could be different from the government or the Cabinet's stand.

As such, he said that Abdullah, who is the Prime Minister to be, "would also be subject to the government's as well as the Cabinet's view."

-- BERNAMA

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