

23 JAN 2003

Mahathir-Students

OPEN UP YOUR MIND, SAYS PM

By: Abdul Muin Abdul Majid

CAIRO, Jan 23 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Wednesday that many Malaysian students who come to study in Egypt refuse to liberate their minds and instead appear to be more extreme than the Egyptians themselves.

Expressing his disappointment over the matter, the Prime Minister said that they would, for example, cover themselves completely and follow the most extreme manifestations of Islam.

"I don't understand. Actually if you come to Egypt, you will be more liberal-minded. For example, in Egypt, there are statues of the pharaohs and people are not worried about it, they don't object to it. And then you see in Cairo a mosque next to a church. Again there is no problem.

"People should learn to be more liberal-minded but we are disappointed that the Malays who come here appear to be more extreme than the Egyptians," he told Malaysian journalists when queried about his perceptions of Malaysian students here.

Speaking during a cruise on the Nile River, Dr Mahathir said that the students might as well stay at home and learn their religion there because they were not learning anything from Egypt.

When asked whether the situation was the result of the influence of certain political parties, the Prime Minister said that this was possible.

"We know that certain political parties regularly send their people to indoctrinate the students, to tell them to hate the government. So that's why they (the students) are like that, otherwise they are not like that," he said.

Dr Mahathir said that Malaysian students were sent to the Al Azhar University with the hope that they would study but there were some who do not, in fact unable to master Arabic.

According to him, there were also students who spend a long time in Egypt but fail to make progress and this was the reason why they face difficulty in seeking employment when they return home.

Frustrated in failing to secure jobs, they become angry towards the government, he said, but they should not blame anyone as they themselves chose whether they wanted to study or not while in Egypt.

"They cannot blame anyone. We've already said that our students must acquire knowledge in various fields...if all of them were to pursue studies in one subject, then it's difficult for us to provide employment opportunities for them," he said.

Dr Mahathir also said that those pursuing religious studies would find limited employment opportunities.

"When we pursue a certain field, we must be aware of the (employment) opportunities we can avail ourselves to in that field. Currently, most of those pursuing studies in IT (information technology), science, engineering...they have vast employment opportunities," he said.

According to him, it was up to the students and their parents to choose but sometimes the parents were the ones who force their children to pursue religious studies, to become hafiz (reciters of the Quran through memory).

"But we do not have many employment opportunities for a hafiz...we do need to have these hafiz but not too many of them," he said.

To a query, Dr Mahathir said that the government was not stopping students from going to Egypt.

"But we're giving them an advice...when they return and are without any

job opportunities, don't blame others, we (they themselves) made the choice," he said.

The Prime Minister said that it would be better if Malaysian students were to come here through the Malaysian embassy as it would be more convenient for the government to take care of their welfare and well-being including when anything happens.

There are some 6,000 Malaysian students in Egypt, mostly studying at the Al Azhar University.

Asked on his meeting with the Grand Sheikh of Al Azhar, Dr Mohammad Sayed Tantawi Wednesday, Dr Mahathir said that he was informed of the moderate stand taken by the university.

"Al Azhar wants to see that the students do well and they have opportunities to work (later). Al Azhar is very pragmatic. That's why they also have courses in engineering, medicine and other subjects. Yes, you can study religion but you must study other subjects as well," he said.

On his talks with his Egyptian counterpart, Dr Atef Muhammad Muhammad Ebeid, Dr Mahathir said that it was agreed that both countries should exchange information over their respective experience in development to enable them to learn from each other.

The Prime Minister also met Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak where their discussions touched on developments in hot spots like Iraq and Palestine.

Queried on his speech criticising Muslims delivered at the Al Azhar University, he said that speaking out his mind had always been his style although people might not like it.

"If I am wrong tell me where I am wrong. If I quote the Quran or the Hadith, tell me if it's not in the Quran or Hadith.

"Don't say this is said by Dr Mahathir, he is not qualified. But the question is whether what I say is correct or not. If I interpret it, is it the proper interpretation. If I say there should be brotherhood among Muslims, am I saying something wrong," he said.

Dr Mahathir flies to Switzerland Thursday morning to attend the World Economic Forum in Davos.

-- BERNAMA

MAM RM