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Mahathir-Zimbabwe

DR MAHATHIR PREPARED TO BE PROSECUTED IF GIFT TO ZIMBABWE AN OFFENCE

PUTRAJAYA, June 11 (Bernama) -- Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today that he is prepared to be prosecuted if the sawn timber given some time ago by Malaysia as a gift to President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe is considered an offence.

The former prime minister said that presenting a gift is a common practice among world leaders.

"But if this is considered an offence, I'm prepared to be prosecuted for abuse of power. It will not be a problem to me...I don't consider myself immune from the laws of this country," he told a news conference to clarify the matter.

Dr Mahathir said that he did not see for himself what was sent to Mugabe but he had thought the gift was in the form of sawn timber and not actually timber as reported by some media agencies. It was later used as wood panelling in the construction of Mugabe's mansion.

Dr Mahathir was linked to the issue following a British Sky News interview last month which reported Mugabe as saying that Malaysia and China has funded his 5 million pound (about RM34 million) mansion in a suburb near Harare.

Asked whether he was upset over how the issue was played up, he said:

"No. I only want to correct the news. I never said it was not given. But what were the circumstances in which it was given.

"It was not given personally by me using government's money to Mugabe.

It was not a personal gift. We presented the gift to a president...if he is not a president, we will not give. The Malaysian government presented him the gift by virtue of his position," he said.

Dr Mahathir said that the prime minister was entitled to give gifts to foreign heads of government and his counterparts, and he himself had received numerous gifts from such persons.

"Wherever I went, I brought along gifts with me, just like other leaders coming here (Malaysia). If there are, for instance the OIC (Organisation of the Islamic Conference), my house will be full of gifts.

When people present them to us, shouldn't we reciprocate," he said.

Dr Mahathir said that the gifts he received from other government leaders were being kept at various locations like in Langkawi, Putrajaya and at his own house.

"I have discharged my duties with sincerity and I adopted the normal practices like any other heads of government," he said.

Dr Mahathir said that the Malaysian government never asked how the gifts presented to the heads of state were to be used.

He said: "We presented all kinds of gifts to presidents and prime ministers including one who is now regarded as a dictator, corrupt and things like that. But when we presented them, we gave to certain people in position. We never ask whether such people are good or bad, whether five years later they will be corrupted or not.

"We don't send people to investigate whether five years, 10 years later, they will become bad people, we cannot foresee what they will be up to.

"If they were to resort to negative actions, it is not that as such, our decision to present them the gifts was wrong. But then, if it is considered wrong, I'm responsible for committing abuse of power."

Dr Mahathir said that previously the Malaysian government had presented some wood to the United Nations, Unesco and many other bodies as it regarded it as a way of promoting Malaysian wood.

Asked on the value of the gift to Mugabe, Dr Mahathir said that the sawn timber did not even come up to RM100,000 and had possibly been used for wall panelling.

On reports pertaining to the construction of Mugabe's mansion, he said that it was a propaganda by the British due to their hatred of Mugabe for acquiring land belonging to the white people in Zimbabwe.

Responding to a question, the former prime minister said he had expected that there would be efforts by certain parties to tarnish his image.

Meanwhile, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said: "I am sure it is done with the best of intention because we want to build linkages with the African countries."

He said maybe the government at that period of time made the decision based on "some consideration", and an arrangement has been made to sent the sawn timber.

"There is nothing illegal" about it, he said after opening the Fifth SMI One-Stop Solution Exhibition and Conference 2004 in Kuala Lumpur.

"The matter shouldn't be made a major issue," he added.

At his news conference, Dr Mahathir, who was also asked on the move by opposition leader Lim Kit Siang to question the declaration that Malaysia was an Islamic country and the appointment of the head of government to be only from among the Muslims, said that Lim should define his interpretation of an Islamic country.

He said it was because many other countries which were "even less Islamic than us" had been regarded as Islamic countries including some member countries of the OIC.

"As such, I don't see what is wrong with the declaration that Malaysia is an Islamic country," said Dr Mahathir who declared that Malaysia was an Islamic country in 2001.

He further said: "We did not claim that our country is secular. We accept Islam as the official religion but this does not mean that everyone in Malaysia must embrace Islam."

However, he said, there were countries which made it a condition that their president or leader must be from a certain religion.

"This is nothing unusual in other countries. In Malaysia, even though there is no such condition, since the majority of the people in Malaysia are Muslims, then therefore there are top positions held by the Muslims.

That is all," said Dr Mahathir.

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