

Pak Lah defends corruption record
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Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi today launched an impassioned defence of his record on battling corruption, saying he was ramping up efforts to battle the scourge.

He also scolded Malaysians for being cynical about the government's anti-corruption efforts, which he said were making headway.

"Perception indicators would have us believe that the fight against corruption is stagnating," he said in a speech to launch the government's Anti-Corruption Academy to train anti-graft officers in Malaysia and the region.

"It must be remembered that perceptions do not always mirror reality. To an extent, the worsening of corruption perceptions is to be expected as we turn the spotlight on corruption," he said.

Abdullah was elected premier in 2004 in a landslide vote on the back of an anti-corruption campaign which promised to crack down on high-profile individuals.

However, opposition politicians and anti-graft watchdogs say progress has been slow, with few meaningful reforms, while former premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad has said that corruption has worsened under Abdullah's watch.

Latest criticism

In the latest criticism, watchdog Transparency International last month released a survey which said Malaysians believe their country has an "acute" corruption problem, and warned it could drive away foreign investors.

But Abdullah accused Malaysians of being cynical about the government's anti-graft drive.

Corruption-related arrests had risen 77 percent, with 564 detained in 2006 compared with 318 in 2001, while conviction rates had risen from below 50 percent to 74 percent, he said.

"I would go so far as to say that the biggest enemy of the anti-corruption agenda is public cynicism and apathy," Abdullah said.

The prime minister also told reporters later the government was stepping up its anti-corruption drive.

"We are taking all sorts of measures," he said, without elaborating.

Abdullah said he was acting on "strong convictions and my belief that this is the right thing to do" and vowed to continue his efforts.

"We need to be able to face our maker on judgement day with a clear conscience," he said.

