



ALL SMILES: Abdullah with Shahrizat before starting the meeting with NGOs on sexual crimes in Putrajaya yesterday.

NGOs hope that response from officials would be positive

PUTRAJAYA, Tues. — Non-governmental organisations welcomed the Prime Minister's openness to their views and criticism, but said this message must be heeded by the rest of the civil service with whom the NGOs deal.

They said the Government should include them in actual decision-making processes and not limit their role to providing feedback.

NGOs described Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's assurance yesterday as an "enhancement of relations" with the Government and hoped it would be put into practice by ministries, departments and local authorities.

"We welcome this statement. But we don't deal with the Prime Minister every day. We hope his message is implemented by other members of the government bureaucracy with whom we are more in contact," said Malaysian Nature Society president Datuk Dr Salleh Mohd Nor.

MNS was among the 30 NGOs represented at the Third Session of the 2005 Budget Consultation with the Prime Minister yesterday. Abdullah had said then that NGOs were the "eyes and ears of the Government" and welcomed their views and constructive criticism.

He also said they functioned as a check and balance to help the Government improve its performance.

Salleh said government officials should realise that when NGOs criticised, they were not attacking

any department or ministry *per se*, but rather the specific actions that caused problems.

"We criticise to seek solutions, not to condemn anyone. We criticise things that are not consonant with the law or policy," he said.

NGOs also said they should be allowed to get involved more actively in the policy-making process.

Women's Aid Organisation executive director Ivy Josiah said NGOs worked with the people and had knowledge of what was happening so there should be representation at all levels of the government machinery.

This should not be limited to forums or dialogue sessions alone, she said.

Malaysian Trades Union Congress-president Senator Zainal Rampak agreed, saying that while the PM was willing to listen to constructive criticism, NGOs' views were not taken seriously.

"We should have representations in policy-making bodies. Right now, only politicians are allowed to do that. We should have a say in whatever is being decided."

Muslim Youth Movement (Abim) secretary-general Azizuddin Ahmad said NGOs were partners in nation-building and it was the combination of the two that made the decision-making process more effective.

Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (Suhakam) Commissioner Professor Datuk Hamdan Adnan said by allowing NGOs to act as society's

watchdogs, the Government would get a more accurate picture of situations.

"The Government should not be overly suspicious of NGOs, which are formed to help it and the people, and not cause problems," said Hamdan.

Centre for Environment, Technology and Development Malaysia (GETDEM) executive director Gurmit Singh, a vocal activist for sustainable development, rated the Government's past relationship with NGOs as "a mixed bag" of highs and lows.

"There was a time when we were viewed as enemies but that has changed. However, there is still a big disconnect between lip service and real action."

He said "hostility" from government officials towards NGOs also depended on the issue at stake and which ministry was handling it.

"Some ministries and officials are more hostile than others. They must learn not to equate constructive criticism with praise and accept criticism based on facts," Gurmit said.

He added that CETDEM would be sending Abdullah a letter, seeking a dialogue with him on sustainable development for the country.

Gurmit also said the Government should not "pick and choose" the NGOs it invited to dialogues and expressed regret that CETDEM was not invited to the Budget Consultation since sustainable development had certain consequences in budget planning.