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WAN-IFRA

'FIGHT TIDE OF FAKE NEWS'

Lies masquerading as facts cancerous for journalism, Najib tells newsmen

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PUBLISHERS and media practitioners, particularly journalists, must fight the emergence of fake news on social media and in foreign newspapers.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said Malaysia, too, had become the target of unscrupulous parties spreading fake news backed by uncorroborated evidence.

"We are far from immune to this problem here in Malaysia. We have had former leaders talking about Malaysia going bankrupt. We have had people talking about Malaysia being in danger of becoming a failed state," he said in his opening address at the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) Asian Media Awards yesterday.

Najib said when opponents of the government spread fake news, some people believed them because they believed in the people who were spreading the rumours.

He said other countries recognised, and had put confidence in, Malaysia's capability, proven by the series of huge investments over the past few months announced by China, Saudi Arabia and India.

"I ask you, does that sound like a failed state to you?"

Najib said these investments would lead to thousands of new jobs and transfer of skills, adding this would help the economy and Malaysia make the quantum leap to becoming a 21st-century beacon of innovation and enterprise in the region and beyond.

He said some critics with little knowledge of economics had been trying to convince people that foreign direct investment (FDI) was akin to Malaysia selling its sovereignty.

"But Malaysia has been encouraging FDI ever since independence. Are we any less sovereign as a result? Of course not.

"To say so is pure ignorance, and betrays a complete lack of understanding of how trade between nations benefits all parties, especially the people. I would never give up an inch of our sovereignty."

Najib said that fake news entering the mainstream and lies masquerading as facts were "cancerous" for journalism, and that the disease posed very serious effects.

He said Malaysia had always been open to allowing its citizens and its press to exercise their rights for or against any party, more so than most countries in the region.

"You may have heard foreign activists talking about 'crackdowns' on free speech

in Malaysia. But look at our press. You will find criticism of the government, of our ministers, of our officials, in our newspapers every day."

Najib said the government recognised the vital role newspapers play in free societies and has opened up space for the democratic scrutiny they rightfully bring to bear.

Before ending his speech, he reminded media practitioners to maintain the trust that readers had in them and to fight, "to the last", the tide of fake news that threatened to turn truth into a subjective matter, with little relation to actual facts.

"The government of Malaysia will be on your side. All we ask in return is the opportunity to remind you to rely on your reporting and sourcing, in whichever country that may be, not on rumours, not on unsourced anonymous quotes, and not on invented propaganda, no matter how persuasively it may be presented, but on verified facts."

Page 1 pic: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak giving the second-place award for Best Newspaper Feature Article to NST special probes editor Farrah Naz Karim (second from right) and NST journalist Aliza Shah (right). With them is World Editors Forum president Marcelo Rech. PIC BY AIZUDDIN SAAD