

Dr Mahathir Rules Out International Mediator's Role
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By Manik Mehta

NEW YORK, Sept 30 (Bernama) -- Former Malaysian prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad has ruled out taking up the role of an international mediator similar to the ones performed by former British prime minister Tony Blair or United States (US) President Jimmy Carter.

He said this during an informal meeting with Malaysian students on Saturday at the Malaysian United Nations (UN) mission in New York.

After the conferring of the Rafik Hariri United Nations Habitat Memorial Award on Dr Mahathir Friday night, some guests were privately asking if he would not make a good mediator for resolving international disputes, given his wide-ranging international experience and his elder statesman status.

"No, I don't think I am qualified for such a role," he told Bernama, adding in a lighter vein that the "world will not listen to me and people will do what they like...so, I would discount such a role."

Dr Mahathir looked relaxed as he fielded questions from the students on issues ranging from the political situation in Malaysia and Malaysia's transition to a developed nation, to the China-Japan conflict.

"You need a strong government to manage a multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-religious country like Malaysia," Dr Mahathir noted.

He also advised the students not to forget the culture and values they brought from home when studying in the West.

"We begin to change in terms of our values and culture after staying in developed countries. Some may even say that we (in Malaysia) are not as progressive as in the countries where you have studied.

"When you compare something good with something better, then your own country doesn't look so good. But when you compare your country with something not so good, then even the bad things begin to look good," he told the students.

He also urged Malaysian students to return home after completing their studies and offer their expertise for nation-building.

"Help Malaysia realise its goal of becoming a developed country by 2020," Dr Mahathir said, pointing out that Malaysia, despite the global downturn, was still growing and "defying gravity", as the Financial Times recently put it.

Looking mentally sharp and alert for his age, 87-year-old Dr Mahathir recalled that at the time of independence from British colonial rule, Malaysia seemed to have been written off, with critics saying that the country would not survive because of its multi-ethnic and multi-racial composition.

"We decided to share our wealth between our communities -- Malay, Chinese and Indian. It's better to have a smaller slice of the cake than the full cake. By sharing the cake, we offered opportunities to the other communities as well," he said, explaining that Malaysia had thus ensured economic growth and prosperity.

He said that Malaysia was blessed by nature and, unlike some of its neighbours, had not been at the receiving end of natural disasters.

Dr Mahathir also spoke against corruption, saying that the person giving bribe was as guilty as the person taking it.

On the recent riots in several Muslim countries over an anti-Islam film made by an individual in the US, he said that he favoured freedom of expression but there were limitations to it, particularly when it hurt the feelings of others.

On the escalating China-Japan tensions and the US role in the conflict, he said: "...You have to be willing to compromise and strike a balance."

He cited Malaysia's examples in reaching deals with its neighbours by taking a 'reasonable stand' when conflicts or issues arose.

Dr Mahathir and his wife Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali were welcomed at the mission by Malaysian ambassador in Washington, Datuk Othman Hashim.

Muhammad Afiq Hassan, a student at the Stevens Institute of Technology in New Jersey, read out a welcome address on behalf of the students.

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