

Dr M: Xenophon's expulsion is 'nothing'
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By Syed Jaymal Zahiid

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 28 — Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad has described the controversial ejection of Australian Senator Nick Xenophon as “nothing” compared to how the US government has allegedly denied trial to suspects detained on suspicion of terrorism.

The former prime minister cited how his “friend”, now deceased, had personally experienced supposed abuse during a visit to the US.

“I would like to relate an incident in which a friend of mine, now deceased, who was handcuffed and taken away in a truck full of common criminals and even his request to have his diabetic injection was rejected.

“The reason for this treatment was because the immigration officers at the airport in New York did not like his answers to their questions. He was subsequently released.

“What happened to YB Xenophon of Australia is nothing,” the influential former premier said in his blog posting today.

Dr Mahathir did not name the person but it is believed that he was alluding to his close friend, the late Tan Sri Eric Chia, then managing director of Perwaja Steel, a company embroiled in a scandal worth close to RM1 billion in the late 1990s, had been detained in the US.

Chia was arrested by New York police at the John F. Kennedy Airport on March 2, 1993 where he was reportedly detained for 24 hours and shuttled between four prisons before being produced in court.

His detention sparked an uproar from both sides of the political divide including from DAP veteran Lim Kit Siang who was then the opposition leader.

Dr Mahathir further argued that Xenophon's treatment by the Malaysian authorities was mild compared to how the West had arbitrarily detained people without trial for suspected terror links.

“It is well-known that hundreds of people have been arrested and detained without trial in the US and a few were subsequently released without explanation. At the detention place there are reports of torture and humiliation of the detainees.

“People are also detained in the UK, accused of planning acts of terrorism. This is preventive detention without trial,” he said.

The former prime minister, known for his staunch anti-Western politics, said although he had not been a victim of such treatment, there was a possibility that he could have been detained for being Muslim.

"I must admit that on the two occasions I visited the US after I retired, I have nothing to complain. But as a Muslim I worry because one of my friends was thoroughly searched as he was thought to be a Muslim. He was not," he said.

Xenophon had arrived in Malaysia two weeks ago as a part of a bipartisan parliamentary delegation comprising three other Australian MPs to meet with leaders from both the opposition and the government to discuss the country's electoral system.

The outspoken senator, however, was detained upon arrival at the Low-Cost Carrier Terminal (LCCT) in Sepang and sent back to Australia the same night for posing a "security risk".

Immigration authorities claimed that Xenophon was prohibited from entering the country due to statements he had made that allegedly tarnished Malaysia's image.

The Australian lawmaker had in the past repeatedly criticised the Malaysian government for its alleged failure to implement a free and fair polls, an allegation Putrajaya has denied.

The incident drew censure from both the local and international political community including the Australian government whom expressed concern over the senator's detention.

Critics of the government's decision to deny Xenophon entry have compared it to Putrajaya's "soft approach" on the Lahad Datu incursion in Sabah, where more than 100 armed men claiming to represent the Sulu Sultanate have lay siege on a village there since February 12.

Opposition leaders claimed Malaysian sovereignty and national security had been compromised following the government's failure to expel the intruders despite the negotiation deadline having expired on Sunday.

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