

Myanmar's ASEAN partners 'indirectly critical' of Rohingya issue - Mahathir

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By Massita Ahmad

SINGAPORE, Nov 15 (Bernama) -- Myanmar's partners in the 10-member ASEAN are "indirectly critical" of and "concerned" over the Rohingya issue, Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad said here Thursday.

They hope that the Rohingya can return safely (to Myanmar), he said at the conclusion of the 33rd ASEAN Summit and Related Summits here.

Dr Mahathir has been consistently critical of Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi, saying she "is trying to defend what is indefensible".

Asked whether the other member nations looked at Suu Kyi "less or not so well", Dr Mahathir said: "I think they are quite restrained in a way. They don't actually condemn her or condemn Myanmar but they are talking more about doing something better."

Dr Mahathir, 93, who is the oldest head of government at this ASEAN summit, noted that the strongest statement on the issue was made by United States Vice President Mike Pence.

Dr Mahathir reiterated that Myanmar should have emulated Malaysia in accepting people of foreign origin after Malaysia became independent 61 years ago.

"Indirectly we mentioned how in Malaysia we accepted people of foreign origin as citizens and we never ask them to leave the country or do anything against them. They are citizens and are in the government. But I mentioned this in another context. I think she knows what I meant," he said.

Asked if he thinks the Myanmar government is serious about resolving the issue, Dr

Mahathir said: “We have to understand the distribution of power in Myanmar. Aung San Suu Kyi is not the Head of Government. In fact, she is a State Councillor.”

Asked if that means that the fate of the government is not in her hands, Dr Manathir said Suu Kyi will be able to influence the government on the opinions expressed during the conference as almost everyone raised the matter.

Asked whether he, as the Prime Minister of Malaysia, will continue to criticise Myanmar and Suu Kyi on the treatment of the Rohingya if nothing is done in the next few months, Dr Mahathir said: “I think she knows very well my views and the government's views.”

“Because when this thing (Rohingya issue) happened, I wrote a letter to her. She did not acknowledge it. She did not reply and I did not ask her if she received it or not.

“But she knows very well that when she was under detention, we gave her full support. We tried our best; we spoke to (Senior General) Than Shwe to have her released and all that. So, I did mention that people who have been under detention should understand the sufferings of people who are badly treated,” he said.

Asked if he got to shake her hand at all or whether she extended her hand first, Dr Mahathir said: “Just a little.”

He said that if she had extended her hand, he could not have ignored her.

“I do not know who was first,” he said, adding that she was standing next to him during the first session, and she turned around to speak to him.

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