

REMOVE YOUR THREATS FIRST, UNIONS TOLD

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DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is prepared "to talk" with union officials on the demands for higher wages for civil servants on condition they "remove their threats" of going on strike.

"I am willing to meet them but they must remove their threats. Just as they cannot work under threats from the Government, I cannot function under threats," he said.

He said that although he was willing to attend the meeting with them, "I cannot promise anything, even if it means losing an (general) election."

Dr Mahathir was speaking to reporters during the afternoon tea-break at the Umno general assembly.

He said disgruntled government workers could vote freely in the next general election and that they could also be involved in political parties "in capacities determined" (by the General Orders).

He said they had a right not to support the Barisan Nasional but this threat did not mean their claims would be approved.

He explained that the Government was unable to entertain the wage claims be-

cause it could not afford them.

"Even the salary increase we offered (between \$15 and \$35 for government workers in categories C and D) will cost us an additional \$300 million annually," he said.

He said he had to ask Finance Minister Daim Zainuddin to make this salary revision despite the Government's tight financial situation.

He said the Government's financial constraints not only the Government's problem but also that of the nation "as the Government

only manages the people's funds."

Earlier, in his opening address, Dr Mahathir said the Government will not give in to demands by the civil servants for more wages even at the risk of being voted out of power.

"We will not allow the country to go bankrupt just to fish for extra votes. We will not mortgage the country for fear of losing seats," he said.

He said the Government would borrow to finance development projects but not to pay the salaries of civil servants.

"Farmers, hawkers, la-

bourers and fishermen are suffering because of the recession.

"Thousands in the private sector are out of work because of the recession but not a single civil servant has been thrown out of a job," he said to the applause of the delegates.

Dr Mahathir said the salary adjustments had affected the country's financial situation.

"I feel sad that those who have been lucky are the same people who are attempting to destabilise the country and probably the rice-bowls of others," he added.

He said he was aware that not all the civil servants were keen on going on strike over the pay claims.

"The ones who are keen are actually their union leaders who have great ambitions. It is easy to become popular by demanding from others."

"But embarking on such a path is dangerous. So be careful," he said.

He added that a strike would affect the development programmes and reduce Government earnings. "The Government's ability to increase wages will be affected for many years."