

Dr M- unions meet may prove crucial

By AHMAD A. TALIB

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad meets public sector union leaders tomorrow in what may be a vital encounter which will determine industrial relations in the government sector in the coming years.

Cuepacs president Ahmad Nor, who is also chairman of the National Joint Council (Staff Side), will head the delegation which will comprise representatives from the five National Joint Councils representing the civil service, the teaching profession, the local councils, the statutory bodies and the subordinates group.

The meeting will be the first between the full council and Dr Mahathir since the civil servants' salary claims were submitted on Nov. 30 last year. In the absence of collective bargaining rights, the trade unions are uncertain how extensive the "talks" will be.

It is unlikely the meeting will discuss the quantum of wage increase, but an exchange of views on the principles governing salary adjustments is well within the scope and functions of the full NJC.

The Staff Side NJC will meet earlier in the day before trooping in to meet the Prime Minister in his office in the evening. The trade unions will seek to arrive at a common position.

The unions will not be pressing hard for a general revision based on the claims submitted. These call for a \$165 raise for employees in Division IV, \$140 for those in Division III, \$175 for those in Division II and \$210 for those in Division I. They also asked for a minimum annual increment of \$20 or five per cent of salary, whichever is the higher, and civil service allowances of between \$110 and \$350.

In the light of the government's tight financial position and the unions' conciliatory tone of late, it is likely the Staff Side will scale down its demands to levels which the government can afford to pay.

If the Prime Minister tells the unions that there would be no counter-offer other than that announced last June to selected categories, the unions will almost certainly demand "some assurance of just rewards in time to come," some unionists who will attend the meeting told *Business Times*.

The Prime Minister may raise the issue of industrial action. The unions have planned a nation-wide strike for Jan. 15, but some say that this may not be possible now.

All affiliates should decide by the end of this month whether to proceed with the strike action so that secret ballots can be issued in time. Some unions doubt whether this can be done in time.