

'Defence goods to be bought if funds available'

By AHIRUDIN ATTAN

THE Government plans to acquire some military equipment from Britain, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said, but will consider buying only after meeting other "more important" commitments, which include civil servants' salary claims and development programmes.

"It's possible that we may try to buy more equipment, which is not unusual, but it will depend on our other commitments and on the funds available," he said after a closed-door dialogue with military chiefs in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

He was speaking at a news conference at the Defence Ministry after the dialogue. He was asked what were the prospects of Malaysia buying arms and other military equipment from Britain.

Early last month, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher were reported to have discussed the purchase of British fighter jets. Mrs Thatcher was quoted to have said that talks were on-going.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir confirmed he had discussed with his British counterpart the prospects of some purchases but added that the Government has other commitments to meet.

"We have to consider claims from civil servants for salary revision and implement development programmes. If there are sufficient funds left after we've made allocations for these, we may then consider buying more defence equipment," he said.

On the salary issue, the Prime Minister said the Treasury is studying whether the Government can afford to implement the revision in view of the good growth rates of the first half of the

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year.

"If there is a recovery in the economy, and it seems there is, the Government will meet the claims."

He declined to say whether provisions for the revision will be included in next year's Budget which will be announced by Finance Minister Datuk Paduka Daim Zainuddin on October 21.

Any decision on the wage claims, however, will also have to take into consideration development programmes, some of which had to be temporarily suspended because there were insufficient funds, he said.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir said the Government gives priority to these programmes.

Asked to respond to Monday's newspaper reports claiming that Malaysian military ships had encroached into Philippine waters and were creating tension between the two countries, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir said: "As far as I'm concerned, our ships were in our waters."

The reports, quoting Philippine military sources, said ships belonging to the Malaysian Navy have been sighted 16 times in their territories this year. They also said the Philippine Government is to send a protest note to Malaysia.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir said Malaysia is prepared to hold talks with the Philippine authorities to resolve the issue "if they can substantiate their allegations".

This is the best way for the two countries to resolve the issue, not through protest notes. "Foreign ships encroached into our waters on many occasions, but we never made loud protests. We had disputes with the Thais some years ago, and these were resolved through negotiations."