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R. E382 AAE
MAHATHIR-PAS
BM

KUALA LUMPUR, SEPT 18 (BERNAMA) -- PRIME MINISTER DATUK SERI DR MAHATHIR MOHAMAD SAID TODAY HE WAS THANKFUL THAT 86 FORMER PAS LEADERS HAVE DECIDED TO SUPPORT THE BARISAN NASIONAL (BN) THROUGH UMNO DURING THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION.

MEETING WITH THE GROUP FOR THE FIRST TIME AT HIS OFFICE AT THE PRIME MINISTER'S DEPARTMENT HERE, HE SAID THE SUPPORT OF THE GROUP WOULD HELP ENSURE A BIGGER VICTORY FOR BN.

BRIEFING REPORTERS AFTER THE ONE-HOUR MEETING, THE PRIME MINISTER'S POLITICAL SECRETARY (II) NOOR AZAM YUSOFF SAID DATUK SERI DR. MAHATHIR IMPRESSED UPON THE GROUP THE NEED FOR A STRONG GOVERNMENT TO GUARANTEE THE NATION'S CONTINUED DEVELOPMENT AND STABLE POLITICAL CLIMATE.

ENCIK NOOR AZAM SAID AMONG OTHER TOPICS DISCUSSED AT THE MEETING WERE THE FORMER PAS LEADERS' REASONS FOR THEIR DEFECTION AND THEIR COMMITMENT TOWARDS HELPING UMNO DURING THE ELECTION.

THE EX-PAS STRONGMEN WERE LED BY FORMER PARTY PRESIDENT, DATUK ASRI HAJI MUDA, AND INCLUDED FIVE FORMER PAS LEADERS FROM PERAK. -- MORE

2231MST 18 09 90

D425

R E383 AAE
MAHATHIR-PAS 2 KUALA LUMPUR

THE GROUP, SAID ENCIK NOOR AZAM, HAD ALSO ASKED THE PRIME MINISTER HIS VIEW ON THE FUTURE OF MUSLIMS IN THE COUNTRY TO WHICH DATUK SERI DR MAHATHIR REPLIED THAT IT WAS IN THEIR (THE MUSLIMS') OWN HANDS.

IN THIS CONNECTION, THE PRIME MINISTER SAID MALAYSIAN MUSLIMS SHOULD STRIVE TO EXCEL IN ALL FIELDS AS THIS BY ITSELF WOULD ELEVATE THE STATURE OF ISLAM.

ENCIK NOOR AZAM SAID THE FORMER PAS GROUP WAS NOW ACTIVELY HELPING UMNO IN CERAMAHS AND BRIEFINGS AT VILLAGES AS PART OF EFFORTS TO ENSURE A BN VICTORY.

+AS THEY HAD BEEN AN INFLUENTIAL GROUP WITHIN PAS, THEIR RAPPORT WITH THE GRASSROOTS IS GOOD AND CAN ATTRACT THE ATTENTION OF ALL, PARTICULARLY FORMER PAS SUPPORTERS,+ HE SAID.

ENCIK NOOR AZAM ADDED THE PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE HAD RECEIVED A REQUEST FROM A GROUP OF FORMER PAS MEMBERS IN KEDAH TO HAVE A SIMILAR MEETING AND THIS WAS BEING CONSIDERED. -- MORE

2233MST 18 09 90

D427

R E385 AAE
MAHATHIR-PAS 3 KUALA LUMPUR (REPEAT)

AMONG THOSE IN THE GROUP WERE ZAHARI AWANG (A FORMER PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY IN THE ALLIANCE GOVERNMENT), WAN ISMAIL WAN IBRAHIM (A FORMER DEPUTY MENTERI BESAR), SALAHUDDIN ABDULLAH (A FORMER KELANTAN EXECUTIVE COUNCILLOR), HAJI MOHAMAD ZAIN ABDULLAH (A FORMER HAMIM MEMBER AND NOW MP FOR BACHOK), WAN SULAIMAN WAN IBRAHIM (FORMER MP FOR PASIR PUTIH) AND WAN MAMAT WAN YUSOF (FORMER STATE ASSEMBLYMAN FOR SEMUT API).

DATUK ASRI TOLD REPORTERS LATER MORE THAN 15,000 PAS MEMBERS HAD QUIT THE PARTY AND JOINED UMNO SINCE FEBRUARY THIS YEAR AND ANOTHER 5,000 MORE WERE EXPECTED TO FOLLOW SUIT WITHIN THE NEXT MONTH. --