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PM SAYS HAJ FARES WOULD BE RAISED IF REASONABLE --

PM-Haj

ALOR SETAR, Jan 16 (Bernama) -- The government would allow Haj fares to be raised if there were reasons for the increase, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohamad said today.

~~He believed~~ that the fares might be raised in view of several factors beyond government control like the increase in cost of fuel and cost of leasing aircraft.

+I believe sooner or later the fares must increase, he told reporters after a meeting with committee members of the Pekan Rabu Co-operative at the Sultan Abdul Halim Airport here.

The Pilgrims Fund and Management Board (LUTH) has announced that charges for performing the Haj would be increased by \$500 per person with effect from this year's pilgrimage.

However, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Datuk **Abang** Abu Bakar **Abang** Mustapha, said yesterday that the LUTH announcement was premature as the matter had yet to be decided by the Cabinet. -- more

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PM-Haj 2 Alor Setar

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir said if the people **wanted** the old fares to be maintained, government efforts to **seek** new sources of income would be more difficult.

+We cannot expect everything to remain **at** the old price. Goods that we import now cost more but we still buy them,+ he added.

The Prime Minister said a decision on the proposal to increase Haj fares -had yet to be made by the Cabinet as the matter had not been referred to it. The Cabinet would discuss it when the matter was tabled.

He also said that the government was studying the possibility of allowing other companies to enter the energy supply market to bring about healthy competition which would lead to cheaper and more efficient services for the people.

Previously, the government allowed a monopoly because electricity supply was undertaken by the government but since **privatisation**, a monopoly would be adverse to the people. -- more

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CNS1657
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PM-Haji 3 Alor Setar

He said: +If it belongs to the private sector, we give a monopoly and they do not give good supply or charge high rates, this would be adverse to the people.

+But, if there are two companies, may be, they will compete and this may lead to lower rates.+

He added, however, that the government had not set the number of companies to be allowed to supply electricity because the matter was just an idea only.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir, who arrived from Kuala Lumpur with Datuk Seri Datin Paduka Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamad Ali for a two-day visit to Kedah, held an hour-long closed-door meeting with the Pekan Rabu Co-operative committee members.

He said he gave them an assurance that the government was prepared to pay for renovations to the Pekan Rabu business complex here if the traders there were willing to give a written undertaking to comply with certain conditions. -- more

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PM-Haj 4 (last) Alor Setar

The co-operative would call a meeting of the traders there to seek their written undertaking.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir said the government could provide training and spend millions of ringgit to beautify the complex but these efforts would be useless if the complex was allowed to fall into a state of disrepair.

The place was so congested with goods that it looked glum and undisposed rubbish made it unattractive to customers, he added.

He wanted the situation to be improved, at least to make it better than its present condition if not as good as complexes found in Kuala Lumpur.

He said the Pekan Rabu, strategically located, was not fully utilised by the traders, thus failing to attract customers and their business suffered.

-- Bernama