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MAHATHIR REMAINS NEUTRAL IN UMNO ELECTIONS

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KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 2 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister and Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad reiterated today that he remained neutral in the elections in the Umno general assembly which begins here tomorrow.

"I do not have a team ... all are in my team," he said of the candidates vying for the various posts in the party.

Although the elections were important because they determined the future of Umno and the country, there was not much difference from previous elections, he told a news conference after a meeting with heads of all Umno divisions.

Umno Youth and Wanita Umno will hold their elections at their general assemblies tomorrow, and the elections for the party proper will be held on Thursday when the three-day party general assembly begins.

Dr Mahathir said he hoped that party members would not misinterpret his stand from the advice he gave them at today's meeting. -- more

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"I have to stress that all the advice I have given, though it may be misinterpreted by supporters of candidates, was with sincerity in the interests of the party and country," he said.

Dr Mahathir said he had not considered the question of a Cabinet reshuffle, particularly in connection with the appointment of the successor to Encik Ghafar Baba who has resigned as the deputy prime minister.

"The appointment of Cabinet members has no relation to the Umno elections because that is at my discretion as the prime minister," he said.

In a lighter vein, he said: "That is the privilege of being a prime minister ... I can appoint (Cabinet members) whenever I feel it is necessary."

Recalling his own appointment as deputy prime minister several months after the late prime minister Tun Hussein Onn had named his Cabinet then, Dr Mahathir said there was no definite time frame for him to name the deputy prime minister. -- more

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He indicated, however, that Ghafar's decision to forego defending the post of Umno deputy president, thus paving the way for Finance Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim to be returned unopposed to the post, might have made it easier for him to pick a deputy prime minister.

On Ghafar, Dr Mahathir said he had not had the opportunity to meet the former deputy prime minister. (Ghafar left yesterday for an overseas trip.)

Dr Mahathir said that if he had met Ghafar, the question of his (Ghafar's) resignation would not have come up because, according to the Attorney-General, the resignation from the post was automatic.

Replying to a question, he said no offer of posts had been made to Ghafar.

To another question, Dr Mahathir said he would continue to serve the country so long as he was able to and was needed. -- Bernama

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