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Anwar-Mahathir

ANWAR A MUCH SOUGHT MAN AT WORLD BANK-IMF MEETING

By: Azman Ujang

HONG KONG, Sept 24 (Bernama) -- Apart from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and US financier George Soros, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim is the most sought-after man by the media at the joint World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) meeting here.

" I have never given so many press interviews as I do here," he told Malaysian journalists today shortly before flying home after his four-day stay here to attend the meeting.

" All I want to do now is go home and sleep," quipped Anwar as he sipped coffee in a paper cup at the small booth assigned to the Malaysian delegation at the sprawling Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre overlooking the harbour.

It was one of 181 such booths to denote the number of countries attending the series of meetings and seminars that made up the 10-day affair which ends tomorrow.

It was in this claustrophobic booth that the two dozen members of the Malaysian media group huddled themselves for Anwar's press conference before his flight home this afternoon, with scores of foreign journalists barred from entering due to lack of space.

Dr Mahathir, who was here for an overnight stay during the weekend, was undoubtedly the most popular with journalists and photographers.

When he came out of a lecture theatre on Saturday after giving a keynote address at a World Bank seminar, he was met by a paparazzi-like scene as photographers fought their way with reporters, who shouted questions as he went down the escalator to his car.

Apart from Chinese Premier Li Peng, who opened the meeting proper yesterday and whose presence led to daily pro-democracy protests in the Hong Kong streets, it was Dr Mahathir who gave the security men to miss many a heart-beat.

Dr Mahathir did not hold a press conference this time around.

Soros generated the same kind of interest and media people from around the world crammed into his press conference Sunday to hear him defending himself against Dr Mahathir's branding him as the speculator who caused the currency turmoil in the region.

But Anwar was definitely a show-stealer in his own right.

Shortly before his press conference today, he sat down for a 15-minute interview with Cable News Network (CNN) and before that another TV channel, CNBC.

Yesterday, Anwar held a packed news conference for the world media which although was originally scheduled for 30 minutes, was extended by 15 minutes to accommodate the big number of journalists present.

And in between his meetings with other finance ministers, including US Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin among others, he would be "ambushed" along the way by journalists and TV crew, too.

After he gave his press conference yesterday, he had to oblige two more ambush interviews as he strode out of the room.

Such was the high-profile nature of his presence here, and hence his remarks that he had never given so many interviews in a few days as he did here.

Hong Kong-based newspapers and magazines in the last few days have been portraying Anwar more as the "damage control" man, a role they say he plays to tone down Dr Mahathir's hard-hitting remarks about currency speculators

like George Soros.

The one remark attributed to Dr Mahathir which Anwar found "very tricky" to answer was a Sunday Morning Post report quoting the prime minister as saying that Malaysia would limit the trading of its currency to the financing of trade, a day after he called for currency speculation to be made illegal.

Anwar countered the report by saying that there was absolutely no change in Malaysia's currency trading rules.

When asked today about his task of "patching up" for his boss' remarks, he said he did not think it was a matter of patching up, but more of clarifying because people here did not understand the Malaysian political scenario and position.

" Not many leaders in the developing world would dare to speak up like Dr Mahathir and therefore I think there is a need to appreciate the general concern and predicament of many in the developing world.

" But I have also to clarify the fact that the prime minister gives a general view and expressing concern of many in the region," he said of excessive currency speculation, which Dr Mahathir over the weekend in a speech here described as unnecessary, unproductive and totally immoral.

A World Bank/IMF daily newspaper published during this meeting, "Emerging Markets" today also called Anwar a referee for the Mahathir-Soros "bout".

Yesterday, Anwar when asked about Soros calling himself a scapegoat for the Malaysian currency turmoil, said the exchange between him and the prime minister was equal, and that he would like to move on instead of being dragged into the controversy.

When a reporter told Anwar today that the World Bank and IMF meeting would have been a very boring affair without him, Dr Mahathir and Soros, he smiled and said: " Yes, but it's been very tough on me." -- BERNAMA

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