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Anwar to be acting Prime Minister (HL)

Ashraf Abdullah

PETALING JAYA, Thurs. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today brushed aside speculation that he is taking a long vacation for health reasons, saying that he would undertake several official duties even when on leave.

The Prime Minister said now was the best time to go on a long leave because the country was politically stable and economically strong.

Dr Mahathir's two-month leave starts on May 19. It, however, starts with a roadshow in London where he is scheduled to promote the Multimedia Super Corridor and visit several places known for the work and research on computers and information technology.

The Prime Minister spoke at length to reporters at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah International Airport in Subang on his return from a week-long three-nation African tour.

He also announced that in his absence, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim will be acting Prime Minister and Home Minister.

Keeping a lively banter with the reporters, Dr Mahathir also answered many questions seriously and seemed to have a lot of fun with the Press corps.

He hoped that his decision to go on leave would not lead to various speculation which might cause problems, including adverse effects on the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange.

Dr Mahathir said although he was Prime Minister for the past 16 years and entitled for a month's leave, he had never taken them in full because of work pressure.

"I think it will be good for me to do some writing on my experiences. At present, I have a lot of work to do.

"I have to go overseas all the time, and when I return, there are (foreign dignitaries) who come here ... I am kept busy. So, I am seeking permission to take leave for two months and I will hand over my duties to Anwar as acting Prime Minister."

This is the first time in 15 years that the Deputy Prime Minister will act as Prime Minister since Datuk Musa Hitam (now Tan Sri) in 1982 and 1985.

Asked whether his decision to go on leave had anything to do with his health, Dr Mahathir said:

"Look at me, am I not healthy? Why should I go on leave after I have gone (overseas) to carry out my official duties. If I am not healthy I would have gone straight away."

To another question, Dr Mahathir said although there were parties who were concerned about his health, they were also the ones who gave him more work.

"People keep asking me how I manage to keep up this pace ... and when I tell them I'm all right, they give me more work.

"They tell me not to work too hard and ask me to rest. But then, I cannot turn down their invitation to launch this and that.

"Everybody is very concerned but I must perform what they ask me to do," he said.

Dr Mahathir said he would not have chosen to go on leave if the country was facing problems and was not as stable as it was now.

"If we are facing problems like we did in 1987, I will not be able to go," he said referring to the 1987 Umno crisis which led the party to be declared illegal the following year by the court and had to battle hard

to be re-registered.

Dr Mahathir said: "This is half way before the election. It is the most comfortable time (to go on leave) ... we are not preparing for election and not implementing election promises.

"This is the best time for me to go. It is the best time to refresh my mind, without having the Press asking me too many questions."

Dr Mahathir, however, said he would still go on official visits while on leave and carry out duties which would not duplicate those of the acting Prime Minister.

When pointed out that it has been a long time since an acting Prime Minister was appointed, Dr Mahathir said:

"Yes, it has been a long time, that's true. In the past when I go overseas, I was on duty as Prime Minister. This time I am going on a long leave and not to work, so there must be an acting Prime Minister."

Asked if this was a test to determine whether Anwar is capable of succeeding him, Dr Mahathir, in a lighter vein, said:

"Yes, he has to sit for an examination. When I come back, I will make him sit down and answer questions. I will then mark the paper.

"Actually only the Press wants to test (him). Others don't have to and I don't have to. He has my full trust. It is normal for me. Everytime, I go overseas, I give him my full trust, even when he was not acting Prime Minister."

Dr Mahathir said although he would not be writing a book, it was necessary for him to put on record his thoughts and experiences.

The Prime Minister said: "I am not writing my book but I have a lot to write about. I think I should sit down and think about how problems can be solved.

"There are also many people who keep asking us how we managed to develop ... the measures that we took have to be written down, otherwise we will forget."

Asked whether his decision to go on leave and to appoint Anwar as the acting Prime Minister was a preamble to his retirement, Dr Mahathir said:

"One day I will have to retire. We will have to face reality. Everybody retires ... the only question is when. It's not a preamble or anything like that. I just need to sit down and do something and not be disturbed by other extraneous things."

When told that the people will miss him for the two months that he goes on leave, he said:

"I will be very touched if they miss me. But people cannot live forever. One day, somebody is going to miss me ... I hope. I, too, miss a lot of people who left early."

Dr Mahathir also said he did not foresee any major problems which would require him to cut short his leave and return.

"If suddenly there is something major, like an earthquake, I will come back. But I don't foresee any major disasters. I don't think a powerful neighbouring country would invade us."

On whether he would announce the new Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister to replace Selangor Menteri Besar-designate Datuk Abu Hassan Omar before May 19, Dr Mahathir said:

"I don't know yet. I haven't really given it a thought. But at some stage, I will have to make a decision as it is a very important ministry. As you know, we are very concerned about inflation and keeping costs low to remain competitive.

"The Domestic Trade (and Consumer Affairs Ministry) is very important. That is why I took it out of MITI (Ministry of International Trade and Industry)."

Later, when approached by reporters, Anwar thanked the Prime Minister

for giving him the confidence by appointing him as acting Prime Minister.

"This is only an administrative matter. Dr Mahathir is still Prime Minister and I will still have to refer to him on certain matters."

He said he would be in constant communication with the Prime Minister during the two-month period.

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