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Mahathir-Leave

DON'T SPECULATE ON MY LEAVE, SAYS DR MAHATHIR

KUALA LUMPUR, May 8 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today his two-month leave from May 19 has nothing to do with his health.

The prime minister said he did not have any health problem but was taking the leave to rest while doing some work and performing official visits to several countries.

Dr Mahathir was asked by reporters whether he was taking the long leave because of health problems.

"Why should I take leave because of health problems. If I want to discharge my daily duties and I'm sick, I will take sick leave," he told reporters at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Airport in Subang, near here, upon his return from a weeklong visit to three African states.

Saying that he hoped his taking leave would not raise speculations, Dr Mahathir said he would take the long leave to record his experiences and thoughts which might be useful to the country in facing the challenges of the future.

Dr Mahathir said that during his leave Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim would be appointed acting prime minister.

The appointment would be gazetted according to the set regulations.

Asked why he was appointing an acting prime minister now, after not having done so for such a long while, he said that his previous overseas trips were short ones compared with the two-month leave he was taking.

The last time Dr Mahathir appointed an acting prime minister was when Datuk (now Tan Sri) Musa Hitam was the deputy prime minister.

"This time I am really on leave, so I'm not doing the prime minister's work, hence there must be someone acting," he said.

However, Dr Mahathir said that during his leave he would also be discharging several official duties as prime minister, especially during the official visits.

He said although it would be viewed as a duplication of duties, it was not a big problem that could affect the duties and position of the prime minister.

"Datuk Seri Anwar will be the acting prime minister with full powers of a prime minister," he said.

Asked whether Anwar's appointment as acting prime minister was a test of his deputy's capability to take over as the nation's leader, Dr Mahathir said: "I don't have to test. I have full confidence in Datuk seri Anwar."

The prime minister said that now was the best time for him to take long leave in view that the situation in the country was good and there were no big matters that needed implementation.

"If the situation is not comfortable I will not go (on leave). When facing problems like in 1987 (Umno crisis) I did not go anywhere. I just sat here and did not even go overseas.

"This is half way between elections. This is the most comfortable time because we are not preparing for an election, nor implementing something that we have promised during an election. So this is the best time for me to go," he said.

The prime minister said he did not see the likelihood of big disasters occurring during his leave and he hoped that such things would not occur.

He said that in his 16 years as prime minister he had worked nearly all the time without taking a vacation although he was entitled to a month's leave annually.

"I hope that I'm allowed to take leave without all sorts of assumptions which may cause problems at the stock exchange and so forth," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the leave would enable him to record his experiences which could help facilitate the implementation of national duties.

"I'm not writing a book but there are lots of things I must write about. Many things I have not recorded, thoughts that may be useful to myself to organise my thinking. Should a problem arise, we have an ad hoc solution. Come another problem and there is another ad hoc solution," he said.

Asked whether his leave was a prelude to retirement, Dr Mahathir said: "No, I only need time to sit down and do something without interruption.

Asked when he would name the new Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister to replace Datuk Abu Hassan Oman who has been named Selangor menteri besar, he said he did not know yet but he wanted to think about it.

He said that this was because domestic trade was an important portfolio as the government took a serious view of inflation, the people's purchasing power and the need to ensure low production costs to make the country more competitive.

That was why he separated the domestic trade division from the International Trade and Industry Ministry, he said.

Anwar, who was among those present to welcome the prime minister home, thanked Dr Mahathir for his confidence in him to act as prime minister during the latter's leave.

Anwar, who is also Finance Minister, said the appointment was a technical matter.

"Dr Mahathir is still the prime minister. I still have to refer to him regarding important and major issues," he said. -- BERNAMA

AH ARA JK