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Dr M quashes talk he is seeking medical attention

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DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who leaves for his longest vacation as Prime Minister next week, has quashed talk that he would be seeking medical attention or that his deputy would be put to test during his two-month absence.

The Prime Minister also laughed off a query if the leave meant he was on the verge of retirement. "One day, everybody has to retire. The question is when," he told a press conference upon his return from a week-long African tour at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah International Airport in Subang yesterday.

Dr Mahathir was asked to confirm news reports that he will take a two-month vacation beginning May 19 and has appointed his deputy, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, as Acting Prime Minister during his absence.

He said he is going on long leave because the present political situation allows him to do so. He also said he has confidence in Anwar to act as the Prime Minister.

"It is already half way to the next general election. This is the most comfortable time of the year for me to go on leave. I do not have to prepare for elections.

"If I am not comfortable (with the political situation), I would not want to go. If we (Umno) are facing problems such as in 1987, I will not go overseas. I will stay here."

Dr Mahathir said he is taking a long break also to "refresh my mind and without having the press asking so many questions".

"I need time. I cannot work like now - going out of the country, come back to entertain visitors and then go overseas again. So, I am asking that I be allowed to take leave for two months and I am passing my responsibility to saudara Anwar," he added.

However, Dr Mahathir said he will still undertake official duties while on vacation. He was reportedly going to several countries, including in Europe and Latin America, to promote high-tech investments in Malaysia.

Dr Mahathir said he needs the long vacation to record his experiences, which could be useful to him as well as the Government. "I am not writing a book but I have a lot of writing to do.

"There are so many ideas that come to my mind. Perhaps, these will be used as an ad hoc solution to tackle any problems that may arise and I think I need to put this in writing. Otherwise, I tend to forget."

The Prime Minister poked fun at a theory that he wanted to examine Anwar's performance. "He (Anwar) has to go through an examination. When I return, I will ask him to sit at the desk and I will correct (the answers) one by one and give marks."

He stressed that it was the press that regarded his two-month absence as a test for Anwar. "I am not giving any test. I have full confidence in Anwar."

Asked why he decided to appoint an Acting Prime Minister this time, Dr Mahathir said: "In the past, when I was away for two or three weeks, my deputy would automatically assume the work of an Acting Prime Minister.

"But in this case, I will be on a long leave and will not be doing the work of a Prime Minister. So, there must be an Acting Prime Minister."

He also dismissed talk that he would seek medical examination during his vacation, saying that if he had a health problem, he would have taken his long leave as soon as he knew about it.

"If I am not healthy, I would go straight away," he said.

Dr Mahathir expressed hopes that he be allowed to go on vacation without any speculation that could create problems or affect the stock market.

He said he is entitled to take a one-month leave each year, but since taking over the Government's leadership 16 years ago, he has yet to fully utilise the privilege because of work pressure.

"Although every year I am entitled to one month's leave, I have never taken the full quota of my leave."

Asked whether he would cut short his vacation if a major incident occurs during the two months, Dr Mahathir said he foresees no "disasters".

"If suddenly there is an earthquake, I will come back. But, I do not foresee any major disaster like bad inflation or our neighbours attacking us."

Anwar, who was at the airport to welcome Dr Mahathir home, told reporters later he is grateful to the Prime Minister for his confidence in him.

However, the Deputy Prime Minister said he will still refer to Dr Mahathir when acting as the Prime Minister. "I have his direct lines overseas," he added.

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