

# *It'll take, time 'for people to believe*

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KUALA LUMPUR: Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad admitted yesterday that he brushed aside allegations of sexual misconduct against Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim for many years.

He said he even put aside information provided by former Inspector-General of Police Tun Mohd Hanif Omar, who retired in 1994.

Thus, the Prime Minister said, it was only to be expected that the people would also take time to believe the accusations against his former deputy because he himself had taken years to believe them.

"Yes, I was told about this before he (Hanif) retired. But I chose not to believe because I found it hard to believe that of a man who projects himself as a religious person," he told a press conference at his office.

Dr Mahathir said he was again told about it last year but dismissed it, believing it to stem from

sheer jealousy over a man who was going to be the leader of the party.

"I eventually resorted to interviewing the people who were sodomised, the women he had sex with and the driver who brought the women to the places.

"They confessed to me without the presence of the police or anybody. I even told them not to confess out of force and that I will protect them.

"But they said no they were not forced by the police. They said they were telling the truth and several said Anwar was not fit to become a leader," he added.

The Prime Minister also said it was difficult for him and the Government leaders to explain to the public the extent of Anwar's sexual misconduct.

"Let me tell what Dr Munawar Ahmad Aness told the police" and Dr Mahathir, cringing, described the sexual act.

"Is this what I have to

go around telling the world that my deputy was doing?"

"This is what the police were told. The act was despicable. And this is a man who talks about other people being despicable," he said.

Dr Mahathir said it would be difficult for him and his colleagues to explain to the people, including children, what had happened.

Comparing the situation with US President Bill Clinton's admission about having sex with Monica Lewinsky, he said Malaysians were conservative and did not talk about such things openly.

However, he was sure that the people would finally believe the truth.

Dr Mahathir lamented that he had groomed Anwar since 1982 to succeed him to the extent of allowing him to overtake seniors and veterans in Umno.

"But when I discovered that he did something which was unforgivable,

action had to be taken," he added.

Although Anwar was his protege, the Prime Minister said such a man could not be allowed to become the leader in a country like Malaysia.

On whether Anwar was trying to overthrow him, Dr Mahathir said there was no need for that as he was going to retire and Anwar had been named successor.

"But if he is in fact planning to overthrow me by making this accusation, I knew about it but chose to ignore because to me, it is quite irrelevant.

"If he is being chosen by the party members, he is welcome to it. If he thinks he can challenge me (at the party elections), I think I can contest against him. I have contested against others," he added.

The Prime Minister said the Government would protect Anwar's family if they were in any danger of being attacked.