

Anwar: Departure of editors part of normal change

By CHARLES CHAN

WASHINGTON: Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim yesterday downplayed speculation swirling over the recent changes of editors at the helm of some party-owned newspapers.

He described the departure of Datuk Johan Jaafar from *Utusan Malaysia* and Datuk Ahmad Nazri Abdullah from *Berita Harian* as part of "on-going normal change."

The exit of the two editors, generally regarded as his political allies, have heightened speculation of a leadership challenge at next year's Umno general assembly.

"What is more important, to my mind, is that the media must remain credible and objective and continue to play its role in the dissemination of information and the truth," he told a press conference called at his hotel suite here.

He later left for home.

Anwar, who is also Finance Minister, clarified the perception frequently played up by the foreign media that he and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad were at odds over policy initiatives, particularly on the issue of interest rates, in

efforts to tackle the financial crisis which continues to wrack the country.

"We complement each other, there are no policy differences," he said.

"There are of course perceived differences because of the pronouncements I made which are tied to the general policies co-ordinated by the Treasury and we are expected to implement them."

Anwar said the Prime Minister had articulated the concerns of the economies in the developing world about the failure of international arrangements to protect the poorer economies while pushing fast-track liberalisation.

"He talks about the general concerns of affected countries while I talk about specific programmes. But because of our different roles, you do see some perceived differences.

"But you must differentiate between the general political concerns and the actual programmes that need to be implemented," he added.

On the issue of interest rates, Anwar said he, too, was in favour of a low interest rate policy but pointed out that this was dictated by inflation,

speculation, and the offshore interest rate of the ringgit.

As a relatively high interest rate would affect the conduct of local businesses, it was necessary to maintain a tight monetary policy, he said.

He said Dr Mahathir's views on this issue were shared by many in the business community.

Asked to comment on the World Bank's response to Malaysia's request for about US\$1bil in new loans, Anwar said the first US\$300mil had already been received to finance social programmes like poverty eradication, development of the agricultural sector, and rural education.

The bank was committed towards disbursing the remaining US\$700mil based on submission of project proposals.

Anwar said the Government's target to eradicate hard-core poverty by the end of next year might not be reached because the economic downturn had enlarged the pool of hard-core poor.

Asked whether Malaysia would reconsider its reluctance to seek IMF assistance, Anwar said: "Right now, the IMF tells me there is no necessity. I am delighted the fund has

so much confidence in Malaysia."

In response to a question, he said Malaysia had no problem with any IMF proposal to carry out a country survey to determine its economic standing.

"We will give our cooperation and provide whatever data is required."

Anwar said the Government's latest assessment was that there was no need to revise its inflation figure and was optimistic that following the projected 1.8% contraction of the economy in the first quarter, there would be a slight rebound in the second quarter.

Anwar also commented on the failure of Japan to initiate effective reforms to stimulate its economic recovery and, indirectly, that of the rest of Asia.

Japan's inaction was causing a lot of resentment in the region, he said, adding that in the past such criticism used to come from the United States but now other countries were also speaking out.

Touching on how this had affected exports, Anwar said: "We are quite fortunate the plantation and manufacturing sectors have not been adversely affected."

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