

08 SEP 1998

LEAD Mahathir-retire

DR MAHATHIR SAYS HE HAD PLANNED TO RETIRE THIS YEAR

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 8 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad revealed today that he had been thinking of retiring this year, making way for Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim to take over.

"I'm sorry that it has come to this," he said of Anwar's sacking last week as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance amidst allegations of sexual improprieties.

"I was thinking of retiring this year ... I went off last year (on two months' leave) to give him a chance to lead the country," Dr Mahathir said. "But for the economic problems, I would have stepped down. Unfortunately, I think I need to stay back to lend some of my experience to find solutions to some of these problems," he said.

Dr Mahathir was speaking to reporters after meeting Umno grassroots leaders from throughout the country to explain the reasons for Anwar's dismissal from the Cabinet and his expulsion from Umno.

Dr Mahathir, who said at another function earlier today that Anwar was sacked because he had "low morals", was asked how long such alleged immoral activities by Anwar had been going on.

He replied: "It's been a long time, but I just came to know".

Asked if he would explain to Malaysians at large about Anwar's case, the prime minister said: "I don't need to explain to Malaysians at large.

"I don't do this to the people whom I literally brought up. Why should I do it to him. I have lots of enemies I would like to do it to them," he said.

On allegations of sexual and other improprieties against Anwar, he said he did not choose an accusation that was so difficult to explain and so difficult for people to accept.

Dr Mahathir said Anwar's credentials as a religious man were very good.

"I should have found some other excuses but unfortunately there are no other excuses."

On whether Anwar would be arrested, Dr Mahathir said: "I don't know."

Anwar has denied the allegations, saying that he was the victim of a high-level political conspiracy.

To this, Dr Mahathir said: "I can't say that I don't know. But what I know is sufficient to tell me that he is not suitable. I don't think politics comes into the matter".

On Anwar's contention that he had been sacked as he posed a challenge to the prime minister (as Umno president), Dr Mahathir said he felt that he could defend himself and he too had sufficient support in the party.

But Dr Mahathir admitted that he had differences with Anwar over the economic management of the country.

"Even if he differs from me, I feel quite sure I can bring him around to share my views and my way of doing things. That doesn't bother me but the allegations about other things, that I cannot accept, the party cannot accept," he added.

Asked what would happen to Anwar if the police found nothing against Anwar, Dr Mahathir said as far as he was concerned he was quite convinced (about the truth of the allegations).

"Unless the police know something that I don't know that is so very clear that it proves his innocence, I don't think he is going to come back," he said.

Dr Mahathir said he was not convinced by Anwar's denials, and added

that even U.S. President Bill Clinton had denied involvement in his own sex scandal.

"Who would want to tell others that he is a bad person?"

Asked if Anwar had admitted committing any of alleged misdemeanours, Dr Mahathir said: "He merely said he was only human and there were some things he did like any ordinary person. However he denied all the allegations.

In his view, it was unbecoming of Anwar to have committed the sexual improprieties when he had been portraying himself as a religious man.

Dr Mahathir said: "The last thing I need at this time when we are trying to manage the country to deal with the economy crisis is another crisis in my hands, but I have no way of avoiding this", he said.

Asked about certain Umno leaders who had pledged their support for him but were seen visiting Anwar following his sacking, the prime minister said he could not read people's minds.

Dr Mahathir also said that Anwar had been given every opportunity to defend himself, unlike others whom he (Anwar), as head of the party's Disciplinary Committee, had passed judgment on in the past.

"Those who have been disciplined did not get the kind of opportunity he had. As far as this party is concerned, we have pushed aside a lot of people who have eventually been found not guilty which is what had happened to one the leaders recently.

"They were charged in court and they were found not guilty but they are still not back in the party. This party maintains a certain standard. If we go by some court judgment alone, without taking into consideration the perceptions of the public then we will be doing something wrong.

"So we take public perceptions into consideration and we act not entirely because the court finds the person guilty or not guilty. We are in fact much more strict than the court.

Dr Mahathir said he was satisfied with the way Anwar's case was handled and Anwar had been given every chance to resign so that matters would not come to this stage.

However, Anwar maintained that he was innocent, "so now he has to prove that he is innocent," Dr Mahathir said

He said that when he confronted Anwar with the allegations, Anwar told him that they were all lies and that a whole lot of people were conspiring to bring him down.

"He is almost paranoid," he added.

Asked what kind of person he would like to have as the deputy prime minister, he said: "I am not looking for a priest or something like that, I am just looking for someone, an ordinary person."

Dr Mahathir was also asked about the absence of Umno Youth Chief Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi at today's meeting.

He said: "I was told that he had taken ill."

There have been mounting calls from within the Youth wing for Zahid to resign for failing to make a strong stand on Anwar's sacking.

-- BERNAMA

ES HS JK