

04/09/1998

Dr Mahathir takes over Finance Ministry

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said he would act as Finance Minister until a suitable candidate is found to fill the vacancy.

However, Dr Mahathir said he would most probably not appoint a deputy prime minister. This is to help avoid being seen as endorsing a candidate in next year's party elections.

Asked how Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim would now be classified as an MP now, Dr Mahathir said the Permatang Pauh wakil rakyat is now considered as an Independent MP.

Dr Mahathir was confident that the decision would not cause political instability in Umno but admitted that members would initially feel shaken.

He said he was saddened by the whole episode, especially as it had to occur at a time when the country was facing economic problems.

Asked whether the expulsion from the party and removal from Cabinet would affect the Commonwealth Games scheduled to begin next week, Dr Mahathir said he was confident that this would not. Asked why Anwar was removed as Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister, Prime Minister said he found Anwar to be unsuitable for the two positions.

Asked whether he thought it was a jinx that Deputy Prime Ministers in Malaysia during his (Dr Mahathir's) tenure as Prime Minister never made it to the top, Dr Mahathir said: "I'm not superstitious."

The meeting continued late into the night with almost all members present. Those not present were vice-president Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who is in South Africa to attend the Non-Aligned Movement, Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib and Datuk Nazri Tan Sri Aziz.

Muhammad, another vice-president, was suspended on May 10 last year following charges of falsely declaring the money he took into Australia in December 1996 and failing to declare more than A\$1.2 million when he left the country.

He was acquitted of both the charges on May 30.

Tonight's meeting was brought forward by five days to specifically discuss the position of the deputy president.

Anwar, who was removed as Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister yesterday, arrived at 8.33pm - almost half an hour after Dr Mahathir.

Leaflets entitled Keadilan Untuk Anwar and their English version "Justice For Anwar" were distributed along with Anwar's Press statement which was released earlier in the day.

Copies of two letters, purportedly sent by Anwar to Dr Mahathir were also distributed. Marked Sulit dan Persendirian (Private and Confidential), the letters dated Aug 25, 1998, and Aug 28, 1998.

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