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Dr M: We believe in working with other countries

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said tonight Malaysia believed in working together with other countries and that the worldwide attention and criticisms by certain Asean leaders, brought about by Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's trial would not last.

During a live CNN interview a week before the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation summit, the Prime Minister also said the decision by a few Apec leaders not to hold bilateral talks with him would not affect the meeting.

"It is not possible for the host to meet (bilaterally) with 21 other heads of government," he said, adding that similarly his absence at the Seattle meeting "has not resulted in Apec breaking up".

Elaborating on his remarks on the current attention on Malaysia, Dr Mahathir said once the trial was over and people know what was right and what was wrong, "I think people will have their position on the issue and resolve it."

"We believe in working together. This kind of things happen to every country...we cannot start criticising one another," he told CNN's Lorraine Hahn on its Biz Asia programme when she asked whether criticisms from certain Asean leaders would affect regional co-operation.

Hahn also asked what would happen if President B.J. Habibie of Indonesia and President Joseph Estrada of the Philippines went one step further and wanted to see Anwar or his wife when they attended the Apec summit.

Dr Mahathir said: "They have not said they wanted to see Anwar. So, I will leave it at that for the moment."

On the currency crisis, the Prime Minister said he was sure Apec leaders would discuss the issue seriously.

He also said he wished to see Malaysia become a developed country by the year 2020 for which all the right strategies and policies would have to be put in place.

He said this would enable the Prime Ministers after him to carry on the plans already laid out.

"I am not important. I am just passing through," he told Hahn when asked how he wished to be remembered.

The 30-minute interview was held at Angkasapuri.

Asked now that he is the longest-serving leader in Asia, how long he planned to stay in power, Dr Mahathir said:

"I would like to step down as soon as possible but I have a responsibility so that my successor can carry where I leave off. That will at least take about a year as next year we will have party elections."

The interview started with a question on Dr Mahathir's relationship with Anwar, and also touched on local political developments.

On whether the Prime Minister will accept Anwar back if he is acquitted, Dr Mahathir said he believed Anwar would not return to Umno, considering the things he had said about the party after his dismissal from the government and party.

Dr Mahathir added that Anwar could run his own political party.

When pointed out that the International Monetary Fund's rescue package "seemed to be working" in some other countries, he said: "That's something we can study together. Other people have other opinions."

On how long the exchange rate control would be in place, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia expected the international community to realise that the kind of anarchy in the world financial regime could not be allowed for

much longer.

On the sort of time frame involved, the Prime Minister said the international community did not work very fast and "I think it will take them at least three to four years to make any decision at all".

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