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PM: Anwar's supporters restricting his movements

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today his former deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim is not under house arrest. But if he seemed not to have freedom of his own, it was because he was surrounded by supporters.

Dr Mahathir said it seemed Anwar had decided that his followers should surround him and keep him at his Bukit Damansara residence.

"I can assure you, if he wants to go around walking alone in any part of Malaysia, he is free to do so," the Prime Minister said when asked to comment on foreign media reports that Anwar was under "virtual house arrest".

He said this at a Press conference to announce the appointment of the US investment bank Salomon Smith Barney as financial adviser to the Government.

The Prime Minister, who is also Home Minister, said although police were still investigating some of the allegations against Anwar, he was sure that when they had sufficient evidence to charge him in court, they would do so.

However, Anwar had surrounded himself with people who knew police could not do anything without hurting them. "If they (police) hurt these people, of course they will say "Look, police brutality!"

The Prime Minister said there was no police brutality "unless you yourself make it difficult for the police to carry out their duties".

At the same time, if any action was taken, Anwar would get full publicity especially in the international Press. "That is what he wants," Dr Mahathir said.

On Anwar's challenge that he be charged in court, Dr Mahathir said if Anwar truly believed in the judiciary those around him should let the due process of law take its course.

Anwar was removed from the Cabinet last Wednesday and expelled from Umno a day later.

Dr Mahathir, who is Umno president, added that his call for Umno members to hold special prayers over the allegations against Anwar at his Tuesday briefing to representatives from the branches and the divisions, was aimed at seeking the truth.

It was not meant to vindicate him or Anwar. "I ask them to hold special prayers so that the truth will ultimately prevail. If I am right, I am right." The same, Dr Mahathir said, applied to Anwar.

Delegates who attended the briefing said the party president had referred to the special prayers held by supporters of Anwar and went on to urge Umno members to hold such prayers to seek the truth.

On Anwar's complaint that he no longer had access to the local media, Dr Mahathir said he thought Anwar had received a lot of publicity, "more than I have".

"And certainly, very positive publicity in the international media. I never get that. Recently, they wrote some nasty things about me which is not fair at all.

"So, I should also be surrounded by my followers because of this attack by the media."

To another question, Dr Mahathir said Umno members were not banned from going to Anwar's residence.

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