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LEAD Mahathir-Post

NO ANNOUNCEMENT ON APPOINTMENT OF NEW SABAH CHIEF MINISTER

KOTA KINABALU, May 7 (Bernama) -- Speculations as to who will be appointed the new chief minister from the non-Muslim bumiputera community in Sabah will continue for at least a few more days as the prime minister has decided not to make any announcement on the matter today.

"I will not announce the name of the new chief minister today," Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said at a news conference at the end of his visit to Sabah.

He said the decision was "simply because I came here to listen and speak to leaders to explain the problems that we face and the need for a very strong government in Sabah, particularly because we are facing this economic problem."

"So, because of that I have come here to discuss with the leaders of the BN, ministers as well as other leaders," he said referring to his 90-minute closed-door meeting with the heads of the Sabah Barisan Nasional (BN) component parties and members of the state cabinet.

On whether there was already a "general consensus" reached among the component parties on who should be appointed to the post, the BN chairman said they had voiced their views and "they gave the undertaking that whoever I choose, they will support."

The general expectation is that the new chief minister to take over the post from Datuk Yong Teck Lee under the rotation system will either be Deputy Chief Minister Datuk Joseph Kurup or state Tourism and Environment Minister Tan Sri Bernard Dompok.

Kurup is the President of Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRS) and Dompok, the president of Parti Demokratik Sabah, both component parties of the Sabah BN.

Dr Mahathir had his audience in stitches when answering a question on whether he had anyone in mind for the post. He said: "Yes, somewhere in my mind I have names, (but) I have not yet identified which part of the mind the name is in."

He also did not foresee any problem arising from the system as the Sabah BN was very matured and understood the concept of BN.

Asked when he would announce the appointment of the new chief minister, Dr Mahathir said it would definitely be known by May 27 (when Yong's term expires) or upon his return from a short visit to Cairo to attend the G-15 Summit beginning on Monday.

The idea to rotate the post was mooted by the prime minister days before the 1994 state elections to give the leaders of the three main communities in Sabah

-- the Muslim bumiputeras, Chinese and non-Muslim bumiputeras -- a chance to lead the state government for two years each.

Under the system, Tun Sakaran Dandai was the first to be appointed chief minister and was replaced by Datuk Salleh Tun Said when Sakaran was appointed the Yang Dipertua Negeri.

Salleh later handed over the post to Yong, representing on May 28, 1996.

Dr Mahathir also said that the system would continue even after the next state election as it had worked well for Sabah.

On whether there would be early elections in Sabah, Dr Mahathir said: "Well, that we will have to consider. The options are open for us... whether (the election is to be held) earlier or later."

Asked on whether his statement during his last visit to Sabah in February, that the new chief minister need not necessarily be the deputy chief minister, still applies, Dr Mahathir said, the options were open.

On the criteria for appointment to the post, he said "There are not many criteria... as long as the person can get the support of everybody and thinks of himself as a Sabahan and Malaysian.

On the possibility of a reshuffle in the state cabinet after the appointment of a new chief minister, he said: "That I wouldn't know. We have to think one by one, first the chief minister's post."

-- BERNAMA

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