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SPECIAL NATIONAL FUND STANDS AT RM2.47 MLN

KUALA LUMPUR, April 29 (Bernama) -- Contributions to the Special National Fund established on March 6, 1998 now stands at RM2,470,701.90, Deputy Finance Minister Datuk Wong See Wah, said today.

He also said the final date of April 6, 1998 set for the collections of funds has been extended to July 6, 1998 as many were still not aware of the fund.

Contributions to the fund include cash in both local and foreign currencies as well as jewellery.

Of the amount collected so far, Wong said cash in local currency amounted to RM1.817 million, cash in foreign currency totalled RM80,193, gold donations (estimated at about 7.0 kg) totalled RM273,150 and jewellery/gems stones RM300,000.

"All the money donated will be placed with the government's consolidated fund ... part of the donations will be used to boost foreign exchange reserves," he told reporters after announcing the extension period of the fund here today.

Wong said contribution could be made through Bank Simpanan Nasional, Bank Islam Malaysia Bhd and Bank Rakyat Kerjasama Bhd.

He added that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, too, had contributed his personal foreign money collection amounting to RM15,000 to the fund.

On top of that, those who contributed more than RM10,000 will be given a special certificate," Wong said.

The fund is managed by the Treasury while the Accountant-General Office has been chosen as the Account Operational Manager.

"No target amount has been set for the fund," he said.

Meanwhile, on interest rates, Wong said the country's current level is more relevant to the situation in the country.

He said that Malaysia's interest rates were high but not as high as expected by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

"By taking comprehensive measures, even though interest rates are not what the IMF wants them to be, we are able to come to a delicate balance, which we think ... can overcome the current economic crisis."

However, he declined to indicate if the government is looking at raising or lowering interest rates.

Asked what will be the level sought by the IMF, he said: "Well if you see Thailand, Korea, their interest rates are above 20 percent, maybe, IMF wants our interest rates to be above that level ... I do not know."

On the IMF's call to Malaysia to liberalise the finance sector earlier than its target date, Wong said: "The government's stand is clear. Targets have already been set ... we have to prepare ourselves to face the competition. That is why we have carried out a series of mergers." --

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