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`Top two should not be challenged'

THE statement by Umno president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Friday that he would support his deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim if there was a contest for the number two post was a clear indication that there were "no problems" between them.

Selangor Umno chief Datuk Abu Hassan Omar, who said this, added: "We hope this (Dr Mahathir's statement) will remove any unfounded belief among members.

"We have full confidence that the leaders will be able to take the country out of the economic doldrums and maintain party stability. We feel the two should not be challenged."

Kedah Menteri Besar Tan Sri Sanusi Junid said party divisions in the State would not propose candidates other than Dr Mahathir and Anwar for the two posts respectively.

Perlis Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim said awareness should be created among Umno members at all levels that the top two positions were not to be contested.

Malacca Chief Minister and State Umno chief Datuk Abu Zahar Ithnin said the State Umno did not want the top two positions to be contested.

On the vice-presidents' posts, Abu Zahar said they should be open for contest as there were many contenders.

Johor Chief Minister and State Umno chief Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman said the State Umno supported the president's statement yesterday.

"Dr Mahathir said if there was a contest for the deputy president's post, he will support the incumbent. This shows that they enjoy a good relationship."

Umno vice-president Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said he would not challenge Anwar for the deputy president's post in next year's party elections.

"I will support Anwar in the event he faces a challenge," he said.

Najib was responding to questions from reporters during a break of the Umno general assembly yesterday on the possibility of him going for the party's number two post based on the fact that he obtained the most votes in the vice-president contest at the last party elections.

The other two vice-presidents are Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib.

On whether he will defend his vice-president's post, Najib said: "This is not the time yet to announce such things, but I do want to maintain my current position."

In a show of support for Umno Youth chief Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, his deputy Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein reaffirmed his stand not to contest the movement's top post in the Umno elections next year.

He said the criticism against Zahid for raising the issues of nepotism and cronyism had not changed his stand in supporting Zahid.

Unless there is a "major change" in the party, he said, his stand "is valid until next year. You can count on this because I am a consistent politician like my father (former party president and Prime Minister Tun Hussein Onn) and grandfather (founder of Umno Datuk Onn Jaafar)."

Speaking to reporters during tea break at Umno assembly yesterday, he said he was backing Zahid as the issues Zahid had raised at the assembly was "wise and done for the good of the party".

On calls by certain quarters for Umno Youth to come up with hard

evidence to back up their claims of nepotism and cronyism, Hishammuddin said the movement had its own reasons for raising the issues.