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Abdullah named new Deputy PM (HL)

Lokman Mansor

DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday named Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as Deputy Prime Minister, in a surprise move that also saw Tun Daim Zainuddin returning to the Finance Ministry.

Ending months of speculation about the country's No. 2 post, the Prime Minister and Umno president also announced, apart from several other changes in his Cabinet, that the Umno elections of Supreme Council members will not be held in June.

The Cabinet reshuffle includes Dr Mahathir himself giving up the Home Ministry portfolio as well as the First Finance Minister's post which he assumed on September 8, the week after Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was removed as Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister.

Daim is now Finance Minister, the position he held from 1984 to 1991 to mastermind the country's recovery from the impact of last decade's global economic recession. In 1993, he was appointed Economic Adviser to the Government and more recently as Special Functions Minister.

Abdullah replaces Dr Mahathir as Home Minister and will in turn be replaced by Datuk Syed Hamid Albar as Foreign Minister.

Speaking at a press conference after the Umno Supreme Council meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Dr Mahathir said the election of the party's Supreme Council members will not be held in June this year and therefore required the immediate appointment of a Deputy Prime Minister.

"Under Umno regulations, we can postpone the Supreme Council elections for 18 months after the General Assembly date, which is June 1999.

Therefore the existing Supreme Council members will remain," Dr Mahathir said.

Umno's general assembly to elect Supreme Council members is scheduled for June while the general elections must be held before April 2000. The post of Umno Deputy President, which was held by Anwar until his sacking from the party on September 3, will remain vacant until the elections of Supreme Council members which are now scheduled before December 2000.

"All this is done so that we can focus on the general elections," Dr Mahathir said.

Other changes to the Cabinet involve the promotion of Deputy Home Minister Datuk Tajol Rosli Ghazali as Minister in the Prime Minister's Department to replace Datuk Abang Abu Bakar Abang Mustapha, who takes Syed Hamid's place as Defence Minister.

Datuk Mustapa Mohamed remains as Second Finance Minister while Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Nazri Aziz is now Deputy Finance Minister.

Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir, the Deputy Human Resources Minister, is the new Deputy Home Minister.

Datuk Dr Affifuddin Omar replaces Abdul Kadir at the Human Resources Ministry while Datuk Wira Mohd Ali Rustam is now Deputy Health Minister. That post was previously held by Wanita Umno chief Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman, who will now be Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department.

Ali Rustam's post as Deputy Transport Minister will be assumed by Datuk Ibrahim Saad, who was previously Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department.

Umno Supreme Council member Datuk Ibrahim Ali has been appointed Deputy

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department.