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Dr M not going to Apec summit in New Zealand

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KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will not attend the Apec summit in New Zealand next week, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said today.

He said Dr Mahathir was not attending because the Prime Minister had other urgent matters that needed his attention.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi will instead be representing Malaysia at the meeting.

Speaking to reporters after presenting the Government's donation to help the earthquake victims in Turkey, Syed Hamid said: "Dr Mahathir could have sent Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz (International Trade and Industry Minister) or me, but he chose the Deputy Prime Minister because he felt there was a need for a high-level representation at Apec," Syed Hamid said.

He was responding to questions by foreign journalists on whether sending Abdullah was an indication that Malaysia was downgrading the importance of the summit.

"Last year, US Vice-President Al Gore attended the meeting in Malaysia in place of President Bill Clinton but the US still considers Apec an important forum," he said.

Asked if Malaysia was boycotting the meeting, Syed Hamid said that the country was sending a full delegation and would express its views and had not done anything to show that Apec was unimportant.

"I think our views on Apec have been well expressed. The fact that the Deputy Prime Minister, Economics Minister and Foreign Minister are attending, shows that the meeting is relevant."

Syed Hamid also dismissed speculation that the decision was related to the possibility that the general election would be called soon, and added that as three ministers would be in New Zealand it would be unlikely that election would be called.

He said there would be no general election until Dr Mahathir decided on it.

Syed Hamid also denied speculation by foreign journalists that the Prime Minister was not attending the meeting due to ill health.

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