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Dr M `very encouraged by sincere reception'

SIBU, Fri. - Concluding another lap of his whirlwind nationwide tour, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said he was very encouraged by the enthusiastic and supportive crowd he met at every stop.

He said this was a genuine gesture.

"All those people wanting to shake my hand... I don't think they are hypocrites," the Prime Minister told a Press conference at the airport here, referring to the big crowd which gathered on the tarmac.

"You can see outside ... my arm nearly came off (from numerous handshakes)," he said in a lighter vein, describing the crowd response.

Last night in Miri, some 40,000 people turned up when he addressed a meet-the-people gathering at the town's amphitheatre. Dr Mahathir said it was "fantastic" considering Miri is a small town.

"They remained rooted to their seats and waited till the end when I was speaking."

He said generally the people of Sarawak were satisfied and happy, alluding to the happy faces he saw.

The Press conference came at the end of his two-day visit to Sarawak.

After Miri, the Prime Minister journeyed to Betong in the Sarawak interior this morning, before stopping here where the crowd gave him a rousing welcome.

Dr Mahathir spoke to the Press about his experience in the past one year, the current election "mood" in the country and why he kept stressing some central themes in his speeches lately.

Attempts by the media for some insight on when the polls would be held, were as usual in vain.

Asked when he would wrap up his nationwide tour ahead of the polls, he said: "It is still a long way off."

He would next go to China and Siberia for what he jokingly described as "makan angin", saying the climate there was cold.

"When my brains clear a bit, I'll come back and see more people," Dr Mahathir said.

To the customary question of whether he now had the inspiration to call for the election, the Prime Minister told a reporter from the Miri Daily:

"I have not got the inspiration yet. When I do, I will ring you."

Asked how life in the past one year had been for him and how he coped with the challenges, Dr Mahathir said: "Very interesting. It has been an education for me."

He said he has now learned all about finances, the economy and about how to deal with rogue currency traders. "I think I have managed it quite okay."

Dr Mahathir described as "fishing" a question on whether the BN would field many new faces for the impending polls given the current political backdrop which was said to be "different".

"When the time comes to choose, we will choose. It all depends on the component parties which will submit the names and we will determine."

On why he had been emphasising themes like peace and harmony in his speeches, Dr Mahathir said this was to show BN wanted harmony and chose not to say nasty things about others.

On possible problems associated with the nation being in the election mood for too long, the Prime Minister said: "The nation has been in the election mood for the past two years because of the Opposition (parties)."

He said the Opposition had been campaigning and putting up their flags for two years now.

"They are hardworking people. Congratulations to them. But I can see their flags rotting already," he said.

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