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Mahathir-Election

MAHATHIR DROPS HINTS ON MALAYSIAN ELECTION

By: Azman Ujang

KHABAROVSK (Russia), Aug 16 (Bernama) -- While Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has so far avoided telling when he will call for the general election, he dropped some hints here today by saying that the situation now is "much better" than a few months ago to hold the election.

But he said he was still assessing the situation and even asked Malaysians who have been kept in suspense over the polling dates to be patient.

" I'm still assessing the situation. I think the situation now is much better than a few months ago. People are now more knowledgeable about things but I have not decided yet," he told Malaysian journalists after attending a briefing at the office of Rimbunan Hijau, a Malaysian company which has logging concessions in this Far Eastern Russian region.

Dr Mahathir, who arrived here last night for a three-day visit, gave further hints on the polls when he said that although he would be attending a number of international conferences in the last quarter of this year, it did not mean that there would be no election this year.

Back home, journalists have consistently been asking the prime minister about the general election but his standard answer has been : " We'll call the election when we think we should."

When asked by Malaysian journalists, who are here to cover his visit, the same question today and that he had been keeping the people in suspense for too long, he gave the same reply but added: " We don't call election just because people are suspended".

He said he would be attending three conferences in September alone, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) forum in Auckland, New Zealand, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York and the South African International Dialogue (SAID).

It is also understood that in between these meetings, Dr Mahathir is due to visit Belarus in Russia and Poland, also in the same month.

Then Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (Chogm), which the prime minister normally attends, is scheduled in November.

" Yes, I shall attend the Apec, UNGA and the SAID," he said.

But when asked if the fact that he would be away attending these conferences meant that the general election would not be held this year as widely expected, Dr Mahathir replied: " No, if I call election, then obviously I won't go".

A journalist told the prime minister that one reason why the media kept asking about the election date was that staff of certain essential government agencies had their leave frozen in anticipation of the election.

" We journalists too could not go on leave," he remarked, causing laughter from those present.

Dr Mahathir clarified that leave for civil servants had not been frozen but only that due to the economic downturn, they are not allowed to spend their leave overseas.

"The leave is frozen not because of the election. They can go on leave but because of the recession, they cannot go overseas," he said.

-- BERNAMA

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