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Mahathir-PM  
MAHATHIR RESHUFFLES CABINET, THEN OFF TO BATAM

By: E. Sivabalan

KUALA LUMPUR, May 20 (Bernama) -- As the prime minister's aides were busy getting ready for a trip to Indonesia's Batam Island, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad held a news conference today amid a flurry of activities to confirm speculations of a minor Cabinet reshuffle involving two senior ministers.

Wearing his favourite grey bush jacket, the gutsy Dr Mahathir, looking relaxed, entered the conference room at the Prime Minister's Office at 8.45am to announce the changes in the Cabinet line-up to local and foreign journalists.

The journalists (limited to one per organisation) who had gathered outside the Prime Minister's Office as early as 7am, made their way into the conference room at 8am, five minutes before Dr Mahathir arrived at his office to clock in for work.

The news conference which was scheduled at 8.30am was delayed for about 15 minutes. It was not quite normal for the prime minister to hold a news conference this early in the day.

As Dr Mahathir took his seat, a reporter went to him to place his tape recorder on the table and wished the prime minister "Good Morning" to which he replied the same.

"O.K., Ready," said Dr Mahathir before he started the news conference by reading a two-page statement.

The two senior ministers dropped in the reshuffle were Information Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Rahmat and Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Seri Sabbaruddin Chik.

During the news conference, Dr Mahathir was asked about the reason for the Cabinet reshuffle, the Malaysian economy, the impending general election and his meeting with Indonesian President B.J.Habibie on Batam Island near Singapore.

He also took a swipe at the opposition parties when a reporter asked him if the opposition would speculate on the Cabinet reshuffle.

"The opposition, even if you don't do anything, they will make speculations. (They make speculations) on my death that day. When I performed the haj, they say I did not perform the rituals the proper way. They are all speculations," he said.

The prime minister, ever too obliging to field questions from reporters, appeared surprised when not many questions were asked this time.

"That's all? No more questions? Thank you very much. You have been very kind," he said.

Dr Mahathir appeared at the news conference clutching a book. When a reporter asked him about the book, he replied: "There is nothing in this book", and laughed.

The news conference ended 10 minutes later.

Before it started, the prime minister's press secretary, Zakaria Wahab, as usual briefed the media about the "do's and don'ts."

"You can ask the PM about anything during the next 30 minutes. After that, the PM will leave for Batam Island," Zakaria said.

Dr Mahathir is in Batam, an Indonesian island in the Riau archipelago, to hold talks with Habibie, a meeting proposed by Jakarta.

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