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Mahathir-Cancel

PM CANCELS TRIP TO COMMONWEALTH SUMMIT

By: Azman Ujang

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 9 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has cancelled his trip to South Africa to attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, said Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar.

Syed Hamid told Bernama this evening he was informed about Dr Mahathir's last-minute decision not to attend the Commonwealth summit just hours before both of them were scheduled to depart for Johannesburg on a Malaysia Airlines flight.

He said he was not told reasons for the cancellation but added that he believed Dr Mahathir had some "pressing matters" to attend to at home.

Syed Hamid declined to say if the prime minister's decision to skip the summit was due to intense speculations that he would call for a snap general election.

"Normally if he decides not to attend important conferences like the Commonwealth summit despite telling earlier that he would attend, there are pressing matters to attend to at home.

"He has skipped the Commonwealth summit before and so had other Commonwealth leaders. This is not something which is unusual," he said.

Syed Hamid also said he would represent the prime minister at the summit to be held in Durban from Friday to Monday.

Dr Mahathir was scheduled to address the summit of former British colonies on the opening day to reply to the welcoming address by South African President Thabo Mbeki.

Queen Elizabeth II will open the summit.

Syed Hamid said Dr Mahathir's absence from the summit should not in any way be perceived as Malaysia's attitude towards the grouping.

"There are times when leaders like Dr Mahathir could not attend the summit and this in no way reflects our attitude towards the Commonwealth.

"All I can say is that the PM has made the decision and there must be more important things that he needs to tackle back home," he said.

Earlier this evening, Dr Mahathir was in jovial mood when he visited the Mines Golf Resort here to inspect preparations for the star-studded World Cup Golf championship to be held from Nov 18-21.

Among those who have confirmed coming for the championship are Tiger Woods and Mark O'Meara, the two big names in US tour circuit now.

Earlier, Bernama reported from Johannesburg that Dr Mahathir was scheduled to arrive in the South African city tomorrow to address the Commonwealth Business Forum before attending the Durban summit.

He is among more than a dozen Commonwealth leaders, including South African President Thabo Mbeki and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who are keynote speakers at the three-day business forum which began today in the exclusive suburbs of Sandton.

Dr Mahathir was to speak on "Making Globalisation Work: Measures to Encourage Commonwealth Trade and Investment Flows" at a dinner tomorrow.

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