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PM evaluating time to hand over power (HL)

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ALOR STAR, Sun. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said he will evaluate the situation to determine when it would be the best time for him to hand over his post to his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

"I do not have the intention to remain as the Prime Minister all my life and get a KSM (Kerja Sampai Mati).

"One day I will have to step down," he said. He, however, could not say as yet when that time would be.

"It can be one year, two years, three years or even four years ... after the general election," Dr Mahathir said to reporters at the Sultan Abdul Halim Airport in Kepala Batas before leaving for Kuala Lumpur after a three-day visit to Kedah.

Dr Mahathir was asked to comment on a report in the Mainichi Shimbun, a Japanese newspaper, which quoted the Prime Minister as saying that he would hand over his post to Abdullah after the next general election which must be held by June 2000 at the latest.

In the April 30 issue of the newspaper, Dr Mahathir was also quoted as saying that he could not tell when Malaysia will hold the election. The report was based on an interview the newspaper had with Dr Mahathir in Kuala Lumpur on April 29.

The Prime Minister was also reported to have said that Abdullah had done very well so far, was popular and was enjoying the support of everybody. Abdullah became the Deputy Prime Minister on Jan 8 this year, succeeding Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, who was sacked from the Government and party in September last year.

Dr Mahathir said he knew many people would be happy to see him vacate the post, but there would also be people who would be unhappy.

He said he had initially intended to step down, but had to stay back as the country was beset with economic problems.

"Anwar was not capable of handling these problems.

"All he knew was what the International Monetary Fund asked him to do - increase interest rates, raise non-performing loan period from three to six months, reduce Government's expenditure. All these had stalled our economy."

These factors compelled him not to step down and hand over his post to Anwar or it would make him (Dr Mahathir) an irresponsible person, the Prime Minister said.

Dr Mahathir added the Government had to make changes to policies which Anwar had introduced in his capacity as the Finance Minister to improve the situation.

Dr Mahathir, who is also Umno president, said the party would not set up clubs similar to those overseas in local universities.

"As far as possible we do not want to bring politics into the universities. We provide scholarships to enable our students to study; if they are too absorbed politicking they will not be able to concentrate on their studies and we need people who are educated."

Dr Mahathir said the Opposition was only interested in winning the elections, but had no concern to what happened to the young people they had influenced for their cause.

"We see university students being used to demonstrate ... you don't have to study (in universities) to kick cars ..."

He said the Government did not want students to waste the people's money by being involved in activities such as riots, adding they could even be expelled for such activities.

He added the Government wanted university students to study so that they could contribute towards the nation's development.

"People who kick cars cannot contribute towards the development of the country."

He said this was similar to lecturers who, despite receiving their salary from the Government, had cheated the latter by inciting students to participate in illegal demonstrations.

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