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PM skips CHOGM, fuels snap election speculation

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has cancelled his trip to South Africa to attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), fuelling speculation of a snap election.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar told Bernama late yesterday he was informed of Dr Mahathir's decision just hours before both of them were scheduled to depart for Johannesburg.

He said he was not told the reasons for the cancellation but added that "normally if he (Dr Mahathir) decides not to attend important conferences, (it means) 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 unusual," the minister said, declining to comment on intense speculation that the Prime Minister would call a snap general election.

Syed Hamid will represent the Prime Minister at the summit. Dr Mahathir was to speak on the opening day after the welcoming address by South African President Thabo Mbeki.

Earlier in the day, Syed Hamid said Malaysia was throwing its support behind Mr Farooq Sobhan, the Special Envoy of Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed, as a candidate to be the new Commonwealth secretary-general.

He said Malaysia believes it is time for the Commonwealth to have an Asian secretary-general.

"It is the turn for someone from Asia to be secretary-general. Farooq Sobhan was formerly secretary-general of Bangladesh's Foreign Ministry and was also High Commissioner to Malaysia. He has enough experience for the job," he said.

Syed Hamid was speaking at a press conference in Kuala Lumpur after a closed-door dialogue on Malaysia's foreign policy and the Commonwealth with Utusan Malaysia's magazine division.

Commonwealth secretary-general Chief Emeka Anyaoku's term ends next April. The election of the new secretary-general is one of the items on the agenda of the November 12-15 (CHOGM) in Durban, South Africa.

So far the contenders for the post are Farooq and New Zealand Foreign Minister Don McKinnon. The Commonwealth has never had an Asian secretary-general in its 50-year history.

This year's CHOGM is themed "People-Centred Development: The Challenge of Globalisation" and will be preceded by a meeting of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group, which will report to the leaders their recommendations regarding Pakistan's membership.

Pakistan was suspended from the Commonwealth after a military coup on October 12.

Syed Hamid said other issues to be raised include currency speculation, debt crisis management, the Commonwealth's perspective on the world economy, restructuring of the international financial architecture, and the World Trade Organisation.

Political issues, meanwhile, include Pakistan, the West Asia peace process and conflicts in Africa.

"We will also discuss the comprehensive test ban treaty, the drive against anti-personnel landmines, and human rights," he said.

Asked about the possibility of independent East Timor joining the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean), the minister said it is

still too early to consider the matter.

"The important thing now is to restore normalcy and stability in East Timor...you cannot be talking about Asean membership until a proper state and government is established," he said, adding that ultimately, "they must want to become part of Asean".

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