

Govt to pay for detained pilgrims' return

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the Government is willing to pay for the return of Malaysian pilgrims who are being detained by the Saudi authorities for overstaying in Mecca on umrah visas.

He said the Government's decision to bring back the pilgrims was due to a report received from the Malaysian Consulate in Jeddah which stated that the pilgrims were detained in "pitiful and uncomfortable" conditions.

"We have decided to bring them back as we feel responsible towards them, and this is if it is allowed by

the Saudi Government," he told reporters after chairing an Umno supreme council meeting in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Early last month, some 172 Malaysians, said to be the largest group so far, were detained along with thousands of others for overstaying in an operation conducted by the Saudi authorities. Forty-nine were later deported back to Malaysia.

Dr Mahathir also told the council that there was slander being spread against him in Kelantan and some other places, that he had asked the Saudi Government to arrest Malaysian pilgrims who used umrah

visas to perform the haj.

"These people were there without the haj visas and this is against the laws of Saudi Arabia," he said, adding that the Saudi Government has to take action against the pilgrims who overstayed in Mecca as the number of offenders is increasing.

Dr Mahathir was also asked whether he will raise the issue concerning the unity of the Malays at the Conference of Rulers on Wednesday.

"It is not on the agenda but if the issue is brought up, I have nothing against it," he said.

Meanwhile, on the Sanggang state by-election, he

said Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi will lead the Barisan Nasional procession to accompany Encik Redzwan Harun file his nomination papers today.

Dr Mahathir said although it is just a by-election, the Government will not treat it as insignificant.

"Sometimes, we regard it as insignificant as we are under the notion that whatever happens, we are still the government," he said. The by-election is scheduled for April 1.

On the suggestion by the Sungai Siput Umno division that a Prime Minister serve a maximum of 12 years, Dr Mahathir said the division

has the right to come up with such a proposal.

"Whether it is accepted or not, it is for Umno to decide," he said.

When told that the division has also agreed to propose that nomination requirements for the top two Umno posts be abolished, he said: "We will see whether the whole body (Umno) will approve that or not. We are democratic."

On another issue, Dr Mahathir said the party will continue to invite representatives from Indonesian political parties to attend the Umno general assembly in May. He said the number of invitations may be increased if necessary.