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Dzaiddin: Restoring public confidence my main priority

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Newly-appointed Chief Justice Tan Sri Mohamed Dzaiddin Abdullah said his main priority is to restore public confidence in the judiciary.

Acknowledging that public confidence was at its lowest ebb, he said there was plenty of work in the next two years to "repair the damage".

"My immediate task is to put our house in order," he said.

Speaking to the New Straits Times in a recent interview, he said it was in the interests of everyone, especially the judges, for the judiciary to have the respect and confidence of the public.

He said many judges had assured him of their support, adding that he would outline his proposals when he met the judges next month.

Asked about public criticism, he said judges should not be afraid of criticism as long as it was constructive and without malice.

"We must acknowledge that our fallibility is always on public display, so we should not be too sensitive and should be slow to wield the big stick of contempt," he said.

Contempt laws should not be used to silence criticism.

Dzaiddin, whose appointment was announced on Nov 9, received his appointment letter from Yang di-Pertuan Agong Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah at the Istana Negara today.

He took his oath of office at the ceremony attended by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Rais Yatim.

Dzaiddin, 63, takes over the post from Tun Mohd Eusoff Chin at a time when the judiciary is facing harsh criticism. His appointment has been welcomed and many have expressed high hopes that he would bring improvements.

When he returned to the Federal Court today, Dzaiddin was greeted by a good number of senior judges who waited to congratulate him.

He declined to speak to reporters but issued a brief written statement. He thanked the Prime Minister and the King for his appointment.

"I also wish to thank all my friends ... and my brother judges who have pledged fullest support to work together towards a better administration of justice to restore the confidence of the public," he said.

He also said he would try to improve the services by reducing delays, the backlog of cases and making the courts more accessible.

He said he looked forward to more cordial relations with the Bar as this was vital to the administration of justice.

On the same topic during the earlier interview, he said it was all right for judges to be friends with lawyers. But judges should know their friends, he added, and be careful not to hear cases involving them.

Born in Arau in September 1937, Dzaiddin had his early education at the Arau Malay School and the Sultan Abdul Hamid College in Alor Star. He joined the Malay Mail as a journalist in 1956 for a short stint before becoming a police inspector.

In 1961, he went to London to study law at the Middle Temple and was called to the English Bar in June 1966. He was admitted to the Malaysian Bar in 1967 and had practised at Kota Baru and Kuala Lumpur.

He was the Malaysian Bar vice-president in 1981/82.

Dzaiddin was appointed a judicial commissioner in 1979, and became a High Court judge in 1982. He served in Penang from 1984 until 1993 when he

was promoted to become a judge of the Supreme Court (now Federal Court).

He is married to Tengku Datuk Paduka Noriah Tengku Ismail and they have two children.