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Ministry's order to close child-care centres, kindergartens rescinded

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PENANG, Sat. - Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has rescinded the order to close all 3,000 child-care centres and kindergartens under the National Unity and Social Development Ministry to contain the Hand, Foot and Mouth disease.

However, the order to close the 123 child-care centres and kindergartens in Johor Baru remains.

Abdullah said the disease was under control and the public should not be unduly alarmed.

The order to close the child-care centres and kindergartens nationwide was made by Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman on Friday. She had said this was necessary as a precautionary measure to prevent the spread of the disease.

Abdullah said there was no need for panic as the disease was "very much under control".

He was speaking to reporters after opening the State Umno convention at Dewan Sri Pinang today. Abdullah was briefed on the HFM situation via telephone by Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng.

Asked to comment on Siti Zaharah's statement, Abdullah said: "I understand why she did so. Maybe she was just overly cautious and it was a pre-emptive move since there are many such centres under her ministry."

He said her statement, however, had caused the people to assume that the disease had spread to other parts of the country. "This is not so as the disease is only restricted to Johor Baru. I will ask Siti Zaharah to rescind her directive."

Abdullah said the Health Ministry was monitoring the situation very closely and had taken precautionary measures to check the disease from spreading. He said Chua would submit a report on the disease to the Cabinet on Wednesday.

Three children have died from the HFM disease.

In Kuala Lumpur, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad advised the public to adhere to directives issued by health authorities. He said if the authorities asked that kindergartens be closed, parents should keep their children at home.

"They must not expose them (their children) unnecessarily," he said after opening the People's Progressive Party's 47th annual general assembly.

On the closure of kindergartens being inconvenient for parents, Dr Mahathir was confident they would be able to address such a problem.

"Parents love their children. They don't want them to die simply because it is inconvenient to have them staying at home. If both parents are working, they will need to make alternative arrangements."

On whether the Government could advise companies to be more flexible with employees who had to take leave to look after their children, he said the Government and the Press could do so.

Asked whether more medical staff including specialists were needed to boost the Health Ministry's handling of communicable diseases, Dr Mahathir said:

"We can be specialists in one disease but not all. This is happening not only in Malaysia but in many other places, some are worst off than us. We may be less affected but we have to take measures."

Meanwhile, an Education Ministry spokesman said it would not be closing

its kindergartens.

"There are not many kindergartens under the ministry."

(END)