

PM meets Umno members in Perak, Kelantan

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**By Farush Khan,
Abdul Manan Osman,
Manisah Ismail and
Hamzah Jamaludin**
news@nstp.com.my

KOTA BARU, Sat. — Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad met the people and Umno members in Perak and Kelantan today.

After ending his visit to Perak in the morning, the Umno president was in Kelantan to open the Gua Musang Umno divisional meeting and meet party members in Tanah Merah and Jeli divisions before attending an Umno dinner here tonight.

Earlier in Ipoh, asked by reporters at the end of his visit about the Eighth Malaysia Plan which he will be tabling in Parliament on April 23, Dr Mahathir said the challenges of globalisation, investment in information technology and the creation of more skilled workers would be the thrust of the Plan.

He said these would be implemented in line with the Government's efforts to eradicate poverty, increase Bumiputera participation in business and restructure society.

"We will also upgrade the capabilities of our workers and produce more trained and knowledgeable workers, and also pay serious attention to investment in the IT sector. Bumiputera participation has declined a bit during the economic crisis."

On improving racial ties, Dr Mahathir said the Government would ensure that all new growth centres

were represented by residents of all races.

On whether he expected that the 8MP would help increase the inflow of investment from the United States, he said Malaysia had no problem with the United States in the investment and the business sectors.

"They (US businessmen) know Malaysia well — only some people do not know it."

On an allegation that Himpunan Nelayan Seluruh Indonesia (Indonesian Fishermen's Association) had threatened to "storm" and "occupy" the Malaysian Embassy in Jakarta on Monday if Malaysia did not apologise for the shooting of an Indonesian fisherman in the Malaysian Exclusive Economic Zone on Feb 1, Dr Mahathir declined to comment.

It was reported in the *Indonesian Observer* yesterday that HNSI claimed it had asked Malaysia to apologise over the incident last month but received no response.

On March 14, Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said a Malaysian navy patrol boat had fired a shot at a foreign fishing boat when it rammed the navy boat.

That day, scores of fishermen in Medan reportedly tried to enter the Malaysian Consul in the region.

On party matters, Dr Mahathir said he and his deputy would not support nor oppose any candidate in the party divisional elections.

"I have stated (in the meetings with divisional leaders) yesterday that Datuk Seri Abdullah (Ahmad Badawi) and I are not involved in any attempt to garner support or

oppose any candidate in the elections.

"They must conduct their own campaigns based on their own performance and not use other people's names," said Dr Mahathir, adding that he wanted the best candidates to win.

"Of course, they must be able to perform. Otherwise, they will be ousted."

Dr Mahathir was commenting on talks among some Umno members that there were leaders claiming they had the backing of party leaders in the contests.

On feedback received during his closed-door meetings with divisional and branch leaders in Parit Buntar and Parit yesterday, Dr Mahathir said he found that the people in these constituencies had no problem supporting Umno.

However, they felt there should be more development and allocations for the areas.

Dr Mahathir said he also explained to the people the tactics and issues usually brought up by the Opposition.

Asked why he chose to visit places where the Opposition had made a strong presence, he said he would like to visit all 165 divisions to boost the morale of Umno members who had been disappointed by the 1999 general election.

At a gathering with Umno members in the Tanah Merah and Jeli divisions at Sekolah Menengah Teknik Tanah Merah, Dr Mahathir said party leaders should not prevent young people with qualifications from joining Umno.

Stressing that they should not

consider the presence of young members as a threat to their positions, Dr Mahathir said the young generation could ensure continuity in the party's struggle.

"What will happen to Umno if young people do not join? We are getting older and when we die, Umno will disappear because the young aren't allowed to join."

Dr Mahathir said the refusal of Umno leaders to accept young blood into the party was one of the reasons which had led them to join opposition parties.

"It is out of frustration that the young people, especially those with qualifications, joined other parties," he added.

He reminded Umno members of the party's struggle, saying that many joined the party for vested interests. This was reflected in the overzealousness of members to contest for party posts.

The situation had led to members resorting to unhealthy tactics including offering bribes to secure positions in the party.

Responding to a question from the floor on the use of the word "Islam" by Pas, Dr Mahathir said court action would be taken against Pas if there was proof of the party using the word to confuse the people.

"If we can prove that the use of Islam (by Pas) is to confuse Muslims, we can bring the matter to court."

He said it was up to Umno members to prove that Pas was misusing the word Islam and that the use of the word could not be banned as it would affect many organisations.