

PM: Stop harping on 10 sen rise

By SA'ODAH ELIAS

KUALA LUMPUR: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday urged the media and the public to stop focussing on the 10 sen per litre or 8% increase in the price of petrol as it was minimal compared to other benefits offered in Budget2002.

"For a country to give a 10% wage increase and bonus to its civil servants, cuts in income tax and other incentives that amount to a huge increase in expenditure and the loss in government revenue at a time when the world is facing a

recession, should at least be acknowledged.

"Instead of appreciating the benefits that we are trying to give to all levels of the society, the media only focuses on the 8% price increase. That is very sad because they should give a fair analysis of the whole budget package," he told reporters, after chairing the Umno supreme council meeting.

The Umno president, who is also Finance Minister, said there was no reason for the people to fear there would be a domino effect following the 8% petrol price rise because it would not justify an increase

in the price of products, services and transportation.

"We know this because we have done our study. In the case of transportation, the petrol components only form between 10% and 20% of their overall cost. An 8% petrol hike means the increase in their overall cost is only between 0.8% and 1.6%, which does not justify an increase in fares," he said.

Dr Mahathir also reminded transport operators and service providers not to take advantage of the petrol price rise by increasing fares.

Even with the price rise, he said, the Government would

have to subsidise the retail price of petrol, which amounts to RM1.4bil a year as returns from the 10 sen per litre price increase was only between RM300mil and RM400mil.

He said while it was not easy due to the prevailing world economic climate, the Government had tried to be fair to everyone when proposing the Budget.

On another matter, Dr Mahathir said he was preparing a letter to US President George W. Bush urging him to stop the attacks on Afghanistan as soon as possible.

He said all political parties

in the country, including the opposition, had agreed on a common ground to condemn terrorism and the attack on Afghanistan.

"It is only the manner and approaches that we take in tackling the two issues that differ," he added.

Dr Mahathir was also asked to explain his statement - that a gay British minister would be chased out of the country if he came visiting with his lover - which was quoted by the British Broadcasting Corporation.

"I don't have any opinion about his private life. But if he comes here in his official

capacity with his friend, we will arrest him.

"That is our law and those who come to our country must submit to our law. It is the same if I were to visit Britain, then I will have to respect its law," he said.

Dr Mahathir, however, said it would be different if the minister, who was not named in the report, were to visit Malaysia in a private capacity with his friend.

"Then, it is different. He can walk around with his friend. But if we catch them for something else, then we will still arrest them because that is our law," he added.