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Daim: I merely wanted to take a break by going on leave

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin, responding to what he described as a "curiosity streak" of the Press about him, said today his decision to go on a two-month leave was merely to take a break.

"I am on leave," he told reporters at the Parliament lobby in response to a question on whether he was leaving the Cabinet.

Asked about his health, Daim said: "I am fine, alhamdulillah ... I just want to rest."

He had earlier attended Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's presentation of the Eighth Malaysia Plan.

Asked for reasons for his leave, he said: "Why? Am I not entitled to my leave?"

Earlier, as Daim entered the House and walked towards his seat, BN backbenchers thumped their table as a sign of welcome to the Merbok MP.

Daim's leave became a subject of speculation, prompting many quarters to suggest that the long leave was a prelude to his resignation from the Cabinet post.

It was reported Daim was still going to his office in Putrajaya daily to check important documents.

Last week, Dr Mahathir denied having a misunderstanding with Daim.

On whether it was appropriate for him to take leave under the country's current economic situation, Daim said: "It is just a slowdown."

He said he would not go abroad during his leave, except to attend the Asian Development Bank meeting (scheduled in Honolulu, Hawaii, next month).

Meanwhile, Dr Mahathir was also asked today if there was a rift between him and Daim.

"I have just fought with him," he quipped to laughter of those present at a Press conference at the Parliament lobby after he presented the Eighth Malaysia Plan.

"That's why he came to listen to my voice (presentation) just now," Dr Mahathir added, referring to Daim's presence in Parliament.

"I don't know why he came since he is on a holiday, but he seems to want to listen to my speech ... like others ... like you people who also want to listen."

Before going to Parliament this morning, Daim attended the International Conference on Corporate Governance at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel.

In his speech at the conference, Daim drew the attention of participants to speculation about his position, saying that he could sense a "certain buzz" in the air as the Press was once on its "curiosity streak".

"I hope this important corporate governance conference will not be obscured by the boundless enthusiasm of the Press to discuss the matter of my leave afterwards," Daim said. "I will not be able to partake of the usual exercise of responding to rapid-fire questions with my friends in the media, struggling to make myself heard amid the din and confusion."