

17 SEP 2001

SEA-Mahathir (Holiday)

DR MAHATHIR DECLARES SATURDAY HOLIDAY

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 17 (Bernama) -- Saturday (Sept 22) has been declared a public holiday to mark Malaysia's success in emerging SEA Games champions for the first time ever, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said tonight.

He said the public holiday was a gift to the people of Malaysia for their strong support to the athletes which helped Malaysia clinch the overall title in the biennial regional games.

Malaysia made an unprecedented haul of 111 gold, 75 silver and 85 bronze medals to topple defending champions Thailand, who finished second with 103 gold, 86 silver and 89 bronze medals.

"Yes, this is a present to the people for their interest and spirit, including those who have come all the way from places like Sabah and Sarawak, to cheer on the athletes," he told reporters after officially closing the Games at the National Stadium here.

He said the spirited support from Malaysians had enabled the athletes to excel in their events and driven the nation to glory.

When asked whether tomorrow would be declared a public holiday, Dr Mahathir said: "Tomorrow is not a holiday. The holiday is on Saturday so that we can have a longer break."

"If the holiday is given tomorrow, it will be just one day, rather short. Saturday can extend into Sunday," he said.

He said the holiday was also for the people to share in the joy of victory and forget whatever differences they may have.

Dr Mahathir hoped that those aspiring to represent the country would start training from a young age so that they would have a better chance to succeed.

"I am confident that if we start from young and train in earnest to build our spirit, we will win in sports," said Dr Mahathir who was visibly happy during the press conference.

He said track and field athletes who did not do well this time around should not be disheartened but should try harder in future.

Asked on his hopes for national athletes competing in future meets like the 2003 SEA Games in Vietnam, Dr Mahathir said he hoped they could maintain excellence in their performance.

"That is what we hope for (excellence). We should not be champions only on homeground. We must be able to hold our own wherever we compete," he said.

"Here we get tremendous support from Malaysians," he said.

Also present at the press conference were Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Youth and Sports Minister Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein.

-- BERNAMA

RAR YBY