

03/11/2001

'Fuss over fuel price hike has overshadowed other Budget benefits'

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today too much focus given to the petrol and diesel price hike has overshadowed the various benefits of Budget 2002.

The Prime Minister said the Government had tried to be fair to all but it was unfortunate the media had only focused on the 10 sen increase in the prices of petrol and diesel.

Because of that, Dr Mahathir said the media had created an impression that the Budget had not been beneficial, whereas various perks had been dished out to civil servants, the private sector and those in rural areas.

"We gave so much. For a country to spend that amount of money during a world recession, I think it is quite an achievement. So please appreciate that also," he said after chairing an Umno supreme council meeting at Menara Dato' Onn.

Dr Mahathir, who is party president, had briefed the council on aspects of the Budget which he tabled in the Dewan Rakyat on Oct 19.

Dr Mahathir who is Finance Minister, said the Government had given much more compared with the RM300 to RM400 million savings it made from the RM1.4 billion petrol subsidy.

The Prime Minister said government staff would be paid a half-month bonus or a minimum RM1,000, besides a 10 per cent increase in salary from next year.

"Those earning RM2,000 and below will get RM1,000 while those earning RM1,000 a month will still get RM1,000 which is actually a month's salary.

"For those earning RM500, it means they will be paid two months' salary."

Dr Mahathir said the half-month bonus only applied to those earning more than RM2,000.

"For example, those earning RM10,000 a month will be paid RM5,000.

"And if one spends RM500 a month on petrol, it is only an additional of RM40 compared to the extra income they are getting."

Dr Mahathir reasoned the additional expense arising from the petrol hike was actually too small compared with benefits provided under the Budget.

For the private sector, the Prime Minister said they would also benefit as the taxable amount had been raised, resulting in many not having to pay any tax at all.

"Surely they can afford to pay a little bit more for petrol."

Those in rural areas have also not been left out, said Dr Mahathir, as billions of ringgit had been allocated for development.

On the petrol and diesel hike being used as a reason by transport operators to increase price, Dr Mahathir said any increase could not be justified as petrol formed only a relatively small component of the transportation cost.

Dr Mahathir was also asked about his interview with the BBC in which he said that the Government would expel any gay British Government Minister who comes to Malaysia with a boyfriend.

Replying, he said visitors to Malaysia must adhere to the country's laws. "This is our law. If they come here then they must follow it.

"When we are there, we have to submit to British laws. If they arrest me for breaking their laws, I have to accept it, so if they are here, then they have to accept our laws.

"If they say that it is their private life, whatever they want to do in

their country, they can do it, but here, we have to arrest them because it is against our law."

Dr Mahathir was also reported to have told BBC radio that the British people accept homosexual Ministers, but if they come to Malaysia with their boyfriend, the Malaysian Government would not accept them and would throw them out.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair had appointed Chris Smith, who is gay, as Culture Minister when he came to power in 1997.

On party matters, Dr Mahathir said Umno planned to increase its membership by 10 per cent. This is being done to counter the slight decline in membership caused by deaths and other reasons.

Dr Mahathir said the council agreed that funds for Puteri Umno and the youth movement would be channelled directly to the two wings.

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