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Members raise issues they want

Zubaidah Abu Bakar; Sharanjit Singh

SIK, Fri. - The dialogue lasted about 20 minutes, but Umno grassroots leaders managed to raise several questions with their president, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Right from the onset of the gathering - Majlis Perjumpaan Mesra dengan Presiden - Dr Mahathir made it clear that he preferred to have a closed-door dialogue so that the exchanges could be open and frank.

Dr Mahathir, however, said a closed-session would not be impossible. Umno gatherings always attracted not only party leaders but ordinary members, supporters and reporters too.

"It's not that we don't welcome them, but it makes it difficult for us to discuss certain things," he said.

After the speech, the Prime Minister reiterated his call to the Malay community to be united and support Umno to ensure they were not left out of the mainstream of development. He said unity was also essential for the Malays as they were still weak in many areas compared to other races.

Dr Mahathir then took questions from the floor.

The questions ranged from the Suqiu's (Chinese Election Appeals Committee) 83-point demands, falling rubber prices and high prices of essential items.

Yesterday, a similar dialogue at Pokok Sena involving the Umno divisions in the town and Padang Terap was called off because Dr Mahathir wanted the dialogue to be frank and not an orchestrated one.

Dr Mahathir is scheduled to have similar gatherings with Umno divisions nationwide to gather feedback from the party grassroots.

Today, microphones were placed at several locations in the hall where the gathering was held. One of the questioners, Sik Umno Youth committee member Abdul Razak Bahari, asked for Dr Mahathir's views on the apparent lack of interest among the younger generation to join Umno.

In his response, Dr Mahathir said the younger generation seemed to reject Umno as they had been brainwashed by Umno's rivals. He said the situation could change if parents take steps to bring their children closer to Umno.

Another participant, Zulkifli Abdul Kadir, an ordinary member from Sik, asked what actions could be taken against citizens who joined hands with foreigners to tarnish the country's image.

Dr Mahathir said these people were traitors who should be rejected.

Zulkifli also asked whether the Government was planning any action against civil servants who supported the Opposition. Dr Mahathir said the Government hoped the civil servants would change their stand but did not dismiss other ways if this failed.

Zulkifli asked a third question, which centred on the falling rubber prices. The Prime Minister said several factors had contributed to this but that rubber tappers should consider switching to other crops for higher income.

A woman, Sik Wanita Umno division committee member Sanisah Hamzah, asked about the increase in prices of essential items.

Dr Mahathir said the Government was trying its best to control the price hike and that the prices of consumer items in Malaysia were still relatively cheap.

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