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No new ministries in minor Cabinet reshuffle, says PM

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - The impending Cabinet reshuffle will be a minor one without the creation of new ministries, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The Prime Minister was satisfied with existing ministries, saying there was no need for new ones.

This put to rest speculation on the setting up of a Women's Affairs Ministry, a Law Ministry and the re-establishment of the Federal Territory Ministry.

Dr Mahathir hinted that no Minister would be dropped as he wanted to avoid any disruption.

"It will involve Ministers but it will not be a major reshuffle. You know me ... I don't just sack or replace people. It is very disruptive."

Turning the tables on reporters, he asked: "Just imagine you return to the office. Suddenly your boss says you have been sacked. How do you feel?"

Asked whether the announcement would be made before Chinese New Year on Jan 24, he said: "InsyaAllah (God willing)."

Dr Mahathir was speaking after attending a Hari Raya gathering organised by the National Unity and Social Development Ministry at the Putra World Trade Centre.

The Prime Minister had earlier had a dialogue with 1,000 small and medium-scale industry entrepreneurs and Bumiputera petty traders. Last week, Dr Mahathir confirmed that a Cabinet reshuffle was imminent and that he needed time to deliberate on it.

Speculation has been rife about changes in the Cabinet following the appointment of Umno executive secretary Datuk Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor as a Senator and the resignation of Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Dr Abdul Hamid Othman.

Pressed for the number of Ministers and ministries involved in the reshuffle, Dr Mahathir said he could not say anything as he had to seek the Royal consent first.

"I got to submit this (changes) to the Yang di-Pertuan Agong. So it is not nice protocol-wise (to make the announcement)."

On whether he had submitted the changes to the King, whom he met during a visit to the Royal museum and art gallery in Klang this morning, Dr Mahathir said the visit was not connected to the reshuffle.

"I met the King and visited the gallery. It was just that."

When pointed out that the long time taken to decide on the changes indicated it would be a major one, he said they could interpret it in any way they liked.

On whether he faced difficulties in making the changes, the Prime Minister said it was not that difficult - it was just that he didn't have much time to think about it.

"I am pressed for time ...I'm feeling like a spinning top. You know I don't have much time in the office," he said.

On whether the announcement would be made by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi while he (Dr Mahathir) was in Japan, he said, "Maybe." Dr Mahathir is scheduled to visit Japan on a working visit from Wednesday to Sunday.

The absence of National Unity and Social Development Minister Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman at the gathering was also raised. It has been

speculated that she would be dropped in the reshuffle.

Putting to rest the possibility of her absence being linked to the impending reshuffle, Dr Mahathir said Zaharah was taken ill and could not attend the function.

"She is really sick," he replied when asked whether she was sulking.

On the replacement for Datuk Seri Dr Abdul Hamid Othman, who resigned as Minister in the Prime Minister's Department early this month, Dr Mahathir said he had yet to make a decision on it.

The Prime Minister was also asked about the appointment of a new chairman for Malaysia Airlines following the decision by the Government to buy back 29.09 per cent equity from Naluri Berhad.

"No, we have not decided yet."

When pointed out that the decision on who to succeed Tan Sri Tajudin Ramli seemed to take a long time, Dr Mahathir said:

"Yes, it is because the process has to be done properly. If you do it wrongly, you can get into trouble. Don't think just buying shares that big does not pose any problem, it poses a lot of problem.

"If a mistake is made, you have to make a general offer or something like that."

On whether the person to head MAS would be a salaried chairman and not someone holding shares like Tajudin, Dr Mahathir said this could not be determined yet.

On the request from the Sarawak Government for the Bakun dam project to be revived according to its original plans, he said the Government was still studying it.

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