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PM: Daim not leaving Cabinet (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Tun Daim Zainuddin, who has taken a two-month leave, is not resigning from the Cabinet, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The Prime Minister added that he had no plans to appoint a new Finance Minister.

He said Daim did not state any intention of retiring.

"No, he did not say anything like that," he said after attending the Young African Leadership and Intellectual Dialogue: Dr Mahathir's Perspective On the Role of the New Generation in Developing Countries this evening.

He was asked whether Daim had indicated his intention to retire.

The Prime Minister had earlier confirmed speculation that Daim was on leave.

Speaking to reporters in the morning after opening the first National Education Convention at Institut Aminuddin Baki at Genting Highlands, he said there was no need for an acting Finance Minister.

"This is because although Daim is on leave, he still visits the office to go through all his documents and letters."

Asked whether the leave was a precursor to Daim resigning, he said:

"That you've got to ask him."

On Daim's reasons for going on leave, the Prime Minister said: "He could be tired," jokingly adding that it could be because "you people (the Press) always disturb him, asking him endless questions and criticise him over the Malaysia Airlines issue".

"We will cross the bridge when we get there ... but at the moment, we have no plans to appoint a new Finance Minister. We have not reached that stage yet," he said when asked at a Press conference later.

On whether Daim's decision to go on leave had anything to do with his health, Dr Mahathir said he was probably tired.

"I think he is tired or something like that. Perhaps, that is why he wants a holiday. But he still works ... he still goes to office sometimes," he said.

To whether it was proper for Daim to leave when the economy was at a critical stage, Dr Mahathir said: "Well, he is not leaving in the first place. He is just going on leave.

"He is still doing work, he is still going through his papers. The only thing that he does not do is to attend Cabinet and Umno supreme council meetings."

He said Entrepreneur Development Minister Datuk Mohamed Nazri Abdul Aziz would be representing Daim in the Cabinet.

Daim's two-month leave has sparked fresh rumours that he is leaving the Cabinet.

It has also generated a lot of interest and given additional input to rumours being churned out on the issue.

When contacted, an aide to Daim said: "The Finance Minister is on leave but he is in the office today doing his work."

In fact, he said Daim would be opening a conference on corporate governance here on Monday and visiting his constituents in the Merbok parliamentary constituency in Kedah on Thursday.

The Finance Minister's two-month leave which began early this month is his first since rejoining the Government four years ago.

However, despite the leave, the Finance Minister will continue to attend his official engagements including official functions except the Cabinet meetings, said the aide.

"He has not been taking a break since returning to the Government. He has been working continuously since December 1997 when he was appointed National Economic Action Council executive director," the aide added.

According to him, the Finance Minister had wanted to go on leave for two weeks last year.

But due to the workload then, he decided to return to work.

Daim was already on leave when he opened the fifth Asean Finance Ministers meeting here two weeks ago.

"Tun Daim has been coming to office everyday since going on leave, including today," he said, adding that the Finance Minister also attended last week's NEAC meeting.

"The Cabinet meetings are the only official function he is not attending," said the aide.