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Mahathir-Sabah (News Focus)

SABAHANS WAIT EAGERLY FOR MAHATHIR'S WEEKEND VISIT

By: Jackson Sawatan

KOTA KINABALU, March 21 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will make a two-day visit to Sabah this weekend, a week after announcing the most anticipated decision concerning Sabah politics -- the continuation of Sabah's rotating chief ministership.

The decision will see Kudat assemblyman Datuk Chong Kah Kiat taking the helm of the Sabah state government from Datuk Osu Sukam in a power transition expected to take place by next week.

Chong, 53, is currently a state minister in charge of Tourism Development, Environment, Science and Technology.

His upcoming weekend trip here will take Dr Mahathir to cover two areas -- Kota Kinabalu city and Tenom, one of Sabah's remotest town 180km from here.

Though constantly a politically-charged state, politics is not the only the focus of attention that the Prime Minister's visit is creating this time around.

On his arrival Saturday morning, he will deliver a keynote address at a high-profile Sabah Bumiputera Economic Congress 2001 here.

"This will be the first such congress in the new millennium and will be of great significance to the Bumiputera economy," said Datuk Ahmad Ali Lope Abdul Aziz, president of the Sabah Bumiputera Chamber of Commerce.

Ahmad Ali Lope, who is deputy organising chairman said the congress would deliberate on several key issues notably challenges faced by Bumiputera entrepreneurs in the 21st century in line with the theme "Bumiputera Economy Beyond 2000: Challenges and Direction".

After opening the congress, the Prime Minister will proceed by helicopter to Tenom, about 40 minutes flight over the vast and densely-jungled interior of Sabah.

A grand welcome is being arranged in Tenom, the heartland of the Murut community.

Tenom's current population of 46,200 people will be enlarged by an additional 20,000 over the weekend as residents from nearby districts converge in the small town to join the prime minister.

All hotels in Tenom are already fully booked for the weekend while those in nearby but larger town of Keningau, are also experiencing brisk reservations.

"We have to double check all bookings so that we will be able to tell exactly how many rooms are still available for booking on that day," a receptionist at a leading hotel in Keningau said when contacted. Keningau is about 40km from Tenom.

In Tenom, Dr Mahathir will perform the ground-breaking for the Tenom-Beaufort highway before attending a dinner with state leaders. He will open the Sabah Agricultural Park the next day before returning to Kota Kinabalu.

On Sunday afternoon Dr Mahathir wraps up his visit by officiating at the ground-breaking for the new Federal Complex near Universiti Malaysia Sabah.

This would be Dr Mahathir's second official visit to Sabah in a month, after the one from Feb 11-12 when the focus then was very much on whether or not the rotation of the chief minister's post among the state's three major communities would continue.

-- BERNAMA

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