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Mahathir-Talks

UMNO STILL OPEN ON MALAY UNITY TALKS, SAYS PM

KUALA LUMPUR, April 14 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today that Umno is adopting an open attitude on the proposed Malay unity talks with PAS in the hope that it will take place.

"We are still open. If they are willing to discuss, other things can also be discussed.

"But we have stated the matters we want to discuss...four topics," he told reporters after attending open house in conjunction with the Vasakhi Day celebration of the Sikh community here.

Dr Mahathir, who is Umno president, said this when asked on the progress of efforts to hold talks between the two Malay parties.

He had said before that the four matters Umno wished to discuss at the meeting touched on Malay rights and privileges, the position of Islam as the official religion, Bahasa Melayu as the national language and the sovereignty of the institution of Malay rulers.

Dr Mahathir said agreement should be reached on matters related to Malay interests as enshrined in the Federal Constitution.

"With regard to the interests of the Malays, in fact we should be in agreement. This is not a political subject. In this country, they (these four matters) are already in the Constitution, so we are not asking for more than that.

"It is whether they support the Constitution or not. Even if they support, they will not lose out in terms of politics," he said.

Asked on the pre-conditions set by PAS for the talks to take place, Dr Mahathir said: "Even before talking, we have to agree, how can this be?"

PAS now wants two conditions to be fulfilled before it would agree to hold the talks. It wants oil royalty for the Terengganu state government to be restored and the party's official publication "Harakah" to be allowed to publish twice a week instead of fortnightly.

PAS had earlier imposed a third condition -- that Umno drop its proposal to ban the word Islam from names of organisations -- but it was rendered irrelevant by a Conference of Rulers' ruling that such usage is allowed.

In his speech, Dr Mahathir said the government was prepared to consider a proposal to declare a public holiday for the Vasakhi celebration.

However, if the proposal was not approved, the minority group should not think that the government did not care for them, he said.

Dr Mahathir said the number of public holidays in the country was limited to 16.

"If we want to give a holiday on Vasakhi, we have to look for another day (public holiday) to be sacrificed," he said.

Asked by reporters later, Dr Mahathir said: "We do not know yet because we have a limit on public holidays.

"There are states which give (holidays) more on other matters. We will see whether it is possible or not," he said.

-- BERNAMA

MS MAM YBY