

Abdullah may lead BN in next elections, says Dr Mahathir

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GENTING HIGHLANDS, Fri. — Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today his deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi might lead the **Barisan** Nasional in the next general election, but refused to say

if the polls would be held before or after next October, when he is scheduled to retire.

Dr Mahathir said he had no problems with allowing Abdullah to lead the coalition and that he would continue to assist the BN "from the outside".

"It may be Abdullah, who by that time, will be Prime Minister and BN

chairman.

"If he is BN chairman, then he will lead. Why not?" he told reporters here.

He said this in response to questions if his advice to BN component parties not to fight for seat allocations was an indication he would call for polls soon.

Dr Mahathir made this call at the closing of the Johor BN convention

yesterday.

He told component parties to abide by the BN supreme council's decision on the number and location of seats in the election.

"It won't be me who will choose (candidates for the next general elec-

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PM to Press: Don't harp on election issue

Nst 27 JUL 2002

□ FROM PAGE 1

tion)." /

The Prime Minister was speaking today after launching the First World Hotel and Plaza, a RM1.2 billion project by the Genting Group.

Asked if his endorsement of Abdullah's leadership in the polls meant that elections would be held after October next year, Dr Mahathir said: "We will see. As you like."

"We are always ready to have an election."

On whether he was indicating that the polls might be held sooner than expected, he said he was referring to the possibility of an increase in the number of seats should there be a re-delineation of constituencies.

"It is not an indication. It is just a possibility. If we revise the election constituencies, there may be an in-

crease in the number of seats.

"If there is an increase, the question is who will contest those seats. That is what I meant (not to fight for seats)."

Dr Mahathir said that although he would not be holding any post, he would help the BN's campaign

"I will help from the outside, that is no problem. I will no longer be president or Prime Minister, so I will be on the outside."

He then ticked off the Press for harping on the election issue.

"I find it is the Press that is *gila* (crazy) about elections.

"By-elections were just over and now you want to talk about elections.

"I wish the Press would be more interested in things that promote Malaysia.

"Instead, there is one case of

meningitis and you undermine the country as if you like to see this country go to pieces.

"I can't understand the mentality of the Press," he said.

He was referring to a recent meningitis scare at Universiti Putra Malaysia, in which there was one confirmed death from the disease.

Dr Mahathir also praised the Genting Group for going ahead with the project despite the economic crisis of 1997.

"During a recession, we should begin work for a recovery. If we hadn't gone on with building Putrajaya during the recession, most of the contractors would have gone bankrupt.

"It's cyclical. During a recession, you buy, and during good times, you sell."